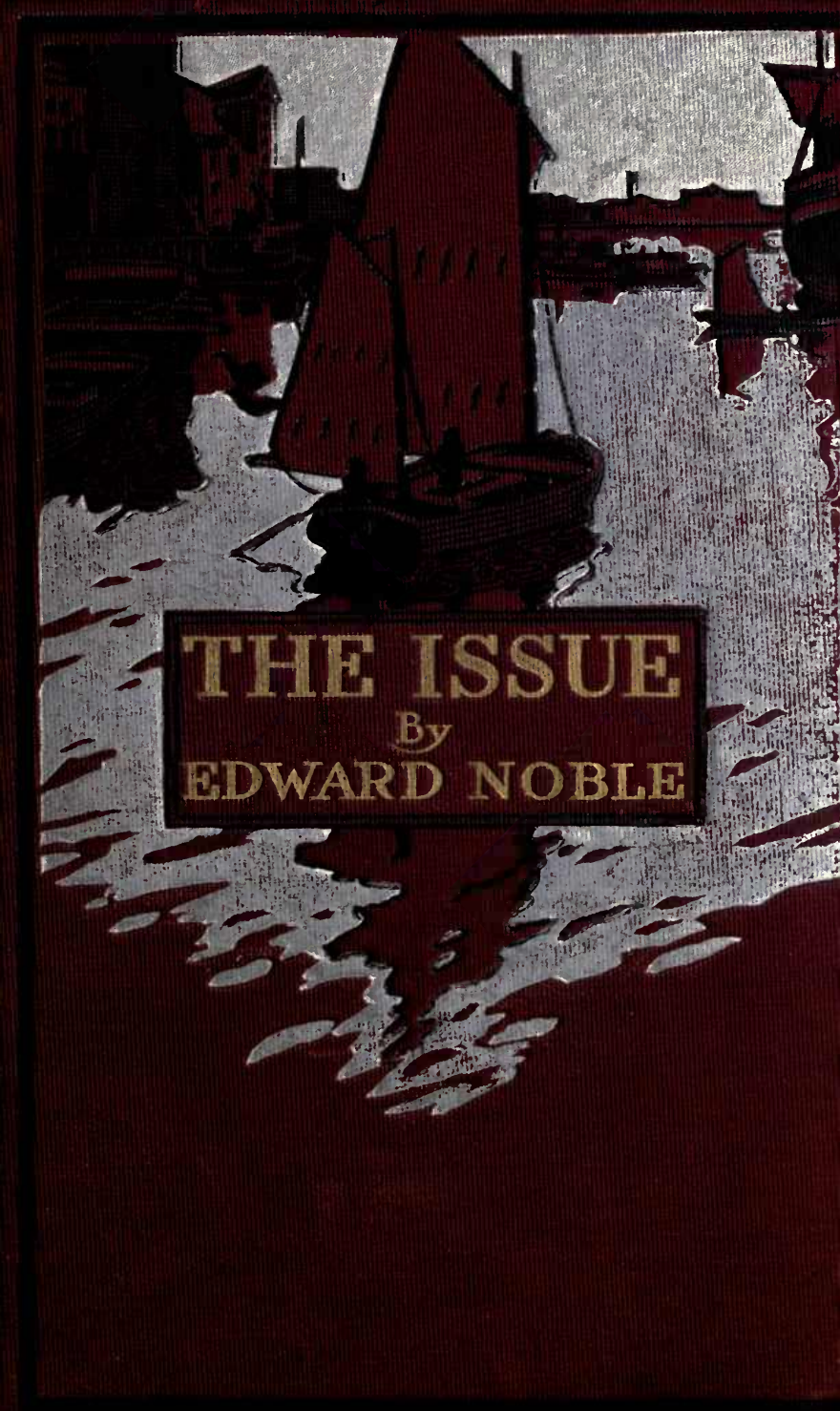

THE ISSUE
By
EDWARD NOBLE

Mrs G. K. Clark

THE ISSUE

The Issue

A Story of the River Thames

By

EDWARD NOBLE

Author of "The Edge of Circumstance"

"*The seed ye sow another reaps;*
The wealth ye find another keeps;
The robes ye weave another wears;
The arms ye forge another bears."—SHELLEY.



NEW YORK
Doubleday, Page & Company
1907

Copyright, 1906 and 1907, by
Doubleday, Page & Company
Published, February, 1907

All rights reserved,
including that of translation into foreign languages,
including the Scandinavian

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This story originally appeared in England under the title *Fisherman's Gat.*

2036274

CONTENTS

PART I. **Two Men and a Maid**

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	The Legend of the Gat	3
II.	Susie Watches a Procession	20
III.	Saunderson Seeks Advice	27
IV.	Mrs. Sutcliffe Deals the Cards	36
V.	And Plays her Hand	48
VI.	Susie Revokes	56
VII.	The Inquisitor	63

PART II. **The Men and Their Master**

I.	The Master	69
II.	The Sea-wall	80
III.	Clack	90
IV.	Micky Doolan Explains	94
V.	Mother Keyne	100
VI.	The Woman Pays	109

PART III. **The River of Life**

I.	Inquisitorial	123
II.	Sutcliffe's Return	126
III.	The Search	134
IV.	Saunderson Plays a Trump	141
V.	Sutcliffe Seeks a Reply	148
VI.	The Difficulty of Belief	159
VII.	A Curtain Lecture	170
VIII.	Zulu Supplies a Parallel	174
IX.	The Methods of the Scorcher	185
X.	In Limine	194

PART IV. The Beginning of the End

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	Saunderson Moves	209
II.	Conditional	218
III.	Tom's Defence	228
IV.	The Sea-wall	238
V.	The Sluckit-sasser	246
VI.	Tooth and Nail	253

PART V. Saunderson Leads

I.	The Prophecy of Old Moore	267
II.	Tony Produces his Link	275
III.	The Strike	284
IV.	Finem Respice	303
V.	Snuffles	314

PART VI. The "Red Gauntlet"

I.	A Woman Passes	323
II.	The Freedom of a Slave	333
III.	Mrs. Surridge Gives Advice	338
IV.	Saunderson's Luck Changes	346
V.	Mrs. Surridge Moves	352
VI.	Bill Marley	363
VII.	A Challenge	378
VIII.	The Issue	384
IX.	The Two who Sowed	391

Epilogue 406

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

Jim Saunderson, a skipper of coasting vessels and a labour leader. An agitator of meagre education but with the gift of speech. Leader of the Riverton Strike and a man of passionate characteristics, handicapped throughout by his dread of the supernatural—"the Curse of the Gat" as he terms it.

Susie Sutcliffe, a mistress in a Church school, and refined and gentle beyond her station. She is the belle of the village, and is loved by the two men, Saunderson and Elliott.

Jack Elliott, skipper of the tug, *Stormy Petrel*, who, in the work of salving a derelict becomes involved also in the Curse of the Gat. A fact of which he does not know, and if he knew, one at which he would laugh. A quick tempered and rather impetuous character. One of the more modern Thames skippers.

Micky Doolan, a yarn-spinning Irishman, mate of the *Tantalus*, and later, skipper of the *Stormy Petrel*.

Wakeley Dunscombe, the men's master. A hard man who grinds his hands in the mill of competition without remorse.

The Scorcher, his successor and a chip of the old block.

Tony Crow, the village blacksmith. Strong, honest, and not swift of comprehension.

George Sutcliffe, an old type "Thames skipper," a man going slowly down hill; oppressed by his wife's oratory, staggered by her biblical quotations—and conscious only of his love for "the Lass," Susie, the child of a former marriage.

Mrs. Surridge, Susie's aunt, wife of Tom Surridge, a small farmer living on the Thames borderland. The pair act as father and mother to the girl after she leaves Abbeyville.

Sailors, bargees, shipwrights, "Cementies."

SCENE

Abbeyville, Riverton, Swinfleet—towns and villages on the Thames between Long Reach and the Nore. The Estuary, London Docks, and the old river.

PROLOGUE

Far out admidst the labyrinth of shoals which throng the river's mouth lies Fisherman's Gat.

A narrow strip of seething foam marks the place at low water; but when the tide is high, and the sea smooth, small vessels can pass the bar in perfect safety.

It is the fisherman's gateway through the Long Sands, and saves many a mile to those who use it. Some on no account would make a passage there; others laugh and blithely sail on. But the superstition which was woven about the place deep in the shadow of by-gone years, dies slowly, and those who believe will go far to avoid the misery of the curse.

For here, in the path of the Gat, on soft, sheeney nights when the moon is only thinly veiled; or when the Gat has bared its teeth before the spume and smother of a southeast gale, sounds drive down the wind and a shadow of a man is seen, sometimes rowing, sometimes standing, sometimes struggling with a boat—and the curse of the Gat falls on all who see him at his task.

PART I.

TWO MEN AND A MAID

Part I

Two Men and a Maid

CHAPTER I

The Legend of the Gat

NO WIND, high water, sundown—and a schooner crawling slowly up the Black Deeps.

The river eyed her sleepily. It made pictures of her rigging, her sails, her attenuated masts; it sketched very correctly a dangling jib sheet with a too large block, hanging from the bows; then threw out little rills, soft, oily, indefinite, and the picture was blurred. It took now the appearance of a drawing carelessly blotted. The lines became straggled, the sails blotched and ragged, the ropes efforts of a tribe of spiders with inky legs; again, in a moment, it stood perfect. The rills had vanished. The river slept.

Across the sky a lightship began a succession of pale flashes, then relapsed into apathy. Farther afield the Kentish Knock* swept the horizon with a methodical swing that drew attention to the isolation of its post: over in the south the Edinburgh* blinked like a busy star on a frosty night, holding a race with the Deeps,* and beating it shamefully.

From somewhere on the schooner's decks came a voice: "Dead cawlm an' the wind south." It added after a pause,

*Lightships in the estuary.

as though questioning this pronouncement; "stick out your lights—then maybe we'll see where it is."

Some one yawned.

In the silence it seemed that the river took up the sound and pushed it into the picture. The water swirled in oily stretches and fell with a rush past the cutwater: it looked up the rudder trunk, gurgling and full of strange anxiety; it lapped in the grass and slime of the bends and grew quiet, lazily quiet in its march to the flat, gray sea.

A man came to the rail and hung out the sidelights—two small dabs of colour. The schooner now looked like a toy, standing on a sheet of glass and illuminated, for children to play with. High up amidst the shadows aloft the sails flapped the rigging. The sound held the echo of cheers, the clapping of hands, laughter.

The river smiled at the notion of additional colour. It took the dabs on its brush and put them into the picture. Like the wax of two guttered candles, crooked and inclined to blob, they ran down to the margin—red, green.

Far up the Deeps, where the shadows were grayer and less luminous, where sea and sky melted into one, a piercing eye appeared, scintillating and throwing out rays. It was as though a hole had been punched in the grayness and a light stood behind. Beneath it again were two small dabs of colour —green, red. A shadow lay behind all three which the water mimicked faithfully.

A tall, squarely built man moved from the wheel and stared into the depths. He had the air of one supremely alert as he stood there marking the lights and watching the shadow growing so rapidly abeam. The sails clanged in the darkness. Chains rattled. The mainsail fell to leeward with a slap that lifted the boom from its somnolence and the picture quivered

with its fall. The gleaming eyes approached swiftly in the form of an equilateral triangle, the apex of which was white. From the shadow came a dull rumbling as of a distant train.

The man moved back to the wheel and rattled it down. "Just my thunderin' luck," he growled; "wind nowhere, kites* all up and down the mast—like a yard of pumpwater." Then, after a considerable pause: "Stand by to down kellick† an' some of you come aft an' trip the luff of this flamin' whanger."‡

The crew shuffled to obey orders and the man resumed his watch. The eyes fascinated him. They appeared disdainfully conscious of the power which drove them. They seemed to hint at the ease with which that small schooner could be wiped from the riverscape and blotted from remembrance. Again he shouted gruffly: "Blow your horn there, some one!" and remained at attention.

A faint purr, husky and supremely inefficient, fell upon the silence. The shadow swerved slightly, rumbled into prominence, swept across the bow, and passed into the haze. A swell, trailing like a sinuous snake, followed in its wake. It crossed the schooner's track and she rolled to the music of slammed doors. Her head strayed idly round the compass, she appeared profoundly disturbed by the sudden awakening; she brought her eyes over to examine the vanishing steamer and the man growled: "Manopolies . . . wage-cutters . . . sweaters! Lumme! if I had my way wiv you, you might say your prayers." His glance fell on the crew watching with stolid unconcern and he shouted further instructions: "Let go! Drop your stays'ls on the cap. Clew up an' give her forty-five when she bites."

*Sails. †Anchor. ‡The mainsail.

He spoke as though he proposed giving a meal to a famished dog: but the men knew that no feast was in preparation. They crossed the deck and started a long-drawn minor shout; the sails clanked, fell with a rush, and the jingling note of a loosed cable filled the night with jets of sound. He who had set these wheels in motion turned on his heel and went below. He was the *Bluebell's* skipper—Saunderson.

In select circles, at home in Abbeyville, this man was spoken of with some awe as Capting Saunderson; but among his confrères of the river he was more generally known as "Win'-bag." Two years ago Abbeyville had never heard of him; then came a rumour which stated definitely that a "shadda" hung over him. But whether the shadow was fluctuating or permanent, visionary or substantial, none of his friends were decided. They appreciated the fact that the newcomer was a strong man, a prosperous skipper who spoke the language of the Thames and had saved "a tidy bit of money"; for those were points in his favour which any self-respecting community may be expected to accept on sight. Saunderson moved comfortably in the knowledge.

Night had fallen when he returned to the deck—a quiet night, dark, hazy, profoundly somnolent. The schooner's lamp, hanging on the foremost swifter, shed a halo of blurred light across planks which were wet and black with dew. All around her, eyes blinked, winked, revolved—racing one against the other and shouting of the dangers they surveyed. Far in the northeast a flicker ran down the heavens; it appeared like a crooked wire, fused in another world.

Saunderson halted on the edge of the companion-way, looking into the darkness. A minute circular glow of red fire, standing beside him, showed the outline of a man's face, the tip of his nose and the marking of his brows. The skipper

approached, grumbling. "In another hour," he said, "it'll be thick as peas-pudden and twice as nasty—a day late, too!"

The circular patch moved in the darkness, and a voice said with a trill: "Arrah! give ut a rest. In another hour the moon will be up an' scoffin' ut."

"Pish!" said the skipper.

The voice replied very confidently: "I know ut. You wait." And again the patch glowed.

"D'you lease this strip of sea, mate?" Saunderson questioned with a tinge of sarcasm. "For if so, I'd thank you for a draught of air. Enough to shove the old *Bluebell* out of the traffic for a start."

Micky Doolan, the mate, sucked placidly. "There'll be enough wind prisintly," he announced, "sthill, if I had been masther, we would have been anchored at the head of the Deeps an' not here."

"Why not?"

"Because av things there's no accountin' for."

"So?" said Saunderson, in a smaller voice, "an' what's that when you've done wiv it?"

"The curse av the Gat."

"Ah!" and again in more resolute tones: "I never heard of it."

The mate withdrew his pipe and waved it solemnly. "Wance," he said, "I laid here before—an' now, if you ask me, I'd give me soul-case to be out av ut." He resumed smoking with the air of a man who knows of what he speaks, and lay back on the skylight.

Saunderson threw a quick glance over his shoulder and strolling to the rail stood counting the leaping signals. Out of nothingness they sprang, into nothingness they retired; like men who fight and struggle for eminence, so they whirled

from space, threw their lights, faded and died. He watched them without intention and found himself rivetted. They mocked at his bearing and discovered something abject in his questionings—"The lives of men—the lives? Chks! they came from nothing, into nothingness they sank." There was no doubt—none. He swore it.

Facing the darkness and in the hush of that lonely anchorage, with the tremor of a new thought, monstrous and ineradicable, he found those jerked flashes annoying. He turned to recross the deck and a sudden flicker sizzled down the heavens. He waited for the thunder, and a faint growl broke out as he resumed his seat by the mate. "They're playin' bowls up there!" he cried. "You're right about the wind."

"If it would come widout any more parleyin', glory be! Amin!" the voice trilled.

Saunderson struck a match and applied it to his pipe, questioning with a ghost of merriment, "Why, what's adrift wiv the place?"

"Don't I tell ye? Sorr, there's iv'rythin' against ut—iv'rythin'! How do I know? Glory be! didn't I lie here in the *Flyin' Cloud* an' see? Tom Mace wass skipper; Dick, Bunny, Walt Thompson, an' Geordie wass the crew. Whhat's come av them all? Whhat's come av the *Flyin' Cloud?* Where's a livin' soul out av all hands—bar me?"

For some minutes silence ensued. The mate puffed lazily at his pipe, nursing his knee with clasped hands.

"You've always got some dawg'eared yarn on the stocks," the skipper grumbled at length; "what if they are all gone under? They aren't the first, are they?"

"No; but here there was a cause. I'm tellin' you, moind."

Again there was a small interval. Micky Doolan somewhat ostentatiously refilled his pipe; Saunderson seemed content

to ponder on the notion which had leaped into being at his words. Then the Irishman's voice came out of the stillness saying sturdily: "Whhat comes av the spirut av a man whin the breath's gone out av him?"

"It don't run to spirits in general, Micky—we mostly take it out in beer," the skipper returned with a dull laugh.

The mate took no heed.

"D'ye think," he resumed, "that if a man kills his wife or thurns her into the streets, her ghost don't walk an' fret him?"

Saunderson twisted uneasily and glanced over his shoulder as a vivid flash lighted the northern heavens, "If I thought that," he growled out, "I'd cut me throat an' a done wiv it."

"Whhat for would ye do that? Played out alridy?"

A dangerous gleam whipped into Saunderson's eyes as the distant thunder rolled an accompaniment to his speech. "You're right, Micky," came the answer, moodily reverting to the former thesis, "but if I were in the case you speak of I'd see my bread buttered thick for the time that's left. Gawd! a man would be a fool to go before his time—or while there's honey in the pot."

"Honey in the pot?" the mate questioned puffing at a pipe which glowed.

"The world's a honey pot, my son, wiv all the sweets—that's the women—lyin' in the middle. The men are the flies, an' they come buzzin' around lookin' after the sweets. But it's only the strong that get a look in. The weakly ones die and the strong stumble over their bodies to get at the sweets, an' the sweets like them best."

"They say you've had your share av the shwates alridy," Micky flashed in merriment.

"Who in flames says that?"

"Asy, Skip—how do I know who says ut—first, annyway?"

"If I had him here I'd twist the damned tongue out av him."

The mate withdrew his pipe and watched the skipper agape. Saunderson noting the look pulled himself together with a swift turn. "Let it slide," he growled, "an' if you do tumble across anyone wiv too much slack at the back of his tongue, let him know what I said—and," he halted shuffling mentally for a new subject, "an' get on wiv your *Flyin' Cloud* yarn. I knew Tom Mace years agone."

There was a lengthy pause during which Micky Doolan sucked somewhat morosely at his pipe and Saunderson, sitting back on the scuttle, let his thoughts fall again on the fancies the mate's words had trailed before him. Haunted! Chks! Well—and if it came? He continued brooding over this until Doolan recalled him to the present.

"Ut wass just such a noight as this," he said, "un' we're not a mile off where the *Flyin' Cloud* came undher the curse—a mile? Whisht! less be half.

"Two years ago, ut wass, come Chrissmus, an' I'm sthandin' at the wheel steerin' for the Nore wid scarce enough wind to kape the rags aslape. The auld man comes up from below an' looks about. 'Micky,' he says, 'dhown kellick an' set a watch. We're makin' no headway; we moight as well be to roost.' So I dhowned kellick, gave her enough chain an' thurned in. Two o'clock come along an' I woke from me slape wid the feelin' av one disgraced. I jumped up quick an' ran out to see the watch.

"The decks are white wid a thin rime av frost, the moon's up, glintin' yellow an' sheeny through the riggin'; the san's are sthill as a dead man's heart. But the bhoy, who's on watch, makes no answer to me call.

"'Micky, me son,' sez I to mesilf, 'whhat's wrong wid the

noight? Ye're nearer the san's than whin ye wint below. Mother av God! the schooner's adrift.'

"I slipped forid in the twinklin' av an oye an' came to the chain to give her more. But the chain's gone from the windlass an' we're grindin' on the edge av the san's before I could belave me soight."

Saunderson glanced up, holding out his hand. "Any boat hangin' aft when you come to, Micky?"

"There wass; but now ut's gone."

"Then the boy's been playin' hanky-panky, an' has done a bolt."

"Maybe that's so, maybe ut's not. I'm not sayin'. I'm just tellin' you the square truth, an' I say that in the mornin', whin we come up the Deeps, the boat's lyin' on the tail av the san's an' Geordie's lyin' besoide her—dead as a five-finger."*

Saunderson made no sign. He continued watching the flickering gleams springing now more generously far in the northeast. At length he spoke, banteringly, with the ghost of stilled laughter lurking in his voice. "An' you think that happened because you're lyin' behind the Long Sands?" he questioned.

"Ut happened—put ut how you will—because the *Flyin' Cloud's* come under the curse."

Saunderson made a gesture of dissent, but no words fell, and the mate resumed as though he had received encouragement. "How do I know?" he cried. "Why shouldn't I whin I see whhat followed? Can a man see his mates all go from before his eyes an' not belave? Whisht! Listen while I tell yez:

"The *Flyin' Cloud* came in an' hauled 'longsoide the derruck to discharge. On the second day, Walt Tompson's

*Starfish.

sittin' on the rail doin' a bit av tallyin' while I get me breakfast. He marks dhown maybe a dozen sthrokes, thin the ginchain broke an' he's lyin' undher an irron bucket loaded wid half a ton av diammints,* an' whin he's dug out we see that Walt Tompson had followed in the way of Geordie.

"Two voyages later, we're goin' acrass the Wash, bound for the Humber. Ut's a cowld noight an' half a gale av wind's a singin' in me ears whin I relave the auld man at twelve o'clock. 'Micky,' he sez, 'we've just clewed up the tops'l an' Bunny's up makin' ut fast. Keep her good an' full till he's dhown.'

"An' I kept her good an' full an' round as a woman's breast till I heard a noise forid loike the dumpin' av a sack av spuds. 'Holy sailor!' sez I, 'whhat are ye shlingin' dhown on top av us? Go asy, ye slummer—you'll be hurtin' somewan.' But there wass no answer, only a stidy flap, flap, flap av the rags blatterin' aloft. So I ran forid to take a look—an' Bunny's lyin' spread out loike a shlaughter-house sheep, dead as muttin'."

Again Saunderson rose from his seat and for a while stood watching the distant clouds. He faced them resolutely, gripping at the rail, and laughed. A peal of thunder rolled over the horizon far off, very mournful, like the roar of a distant cannonade. The laugh died as he returned to the skylight. Micky Doolan sat thoughtfully sucking his pipe.

"That voyage began bad, but ut ended worse," he announced gravely. "We loaded dhown wid harrds† an' came out in the teeth av a gale av wind. The skipper's goin' to make a smart run. Ut's the auld woman's birthday and Tom Mace manes to spend ut to home. He does spend ut to home, sure as guns.

"Sat'day mornin' put us dhown aff the Long-s'nd Light-

*Coal. †Yorkshire hards, a quality of coal.

ship, an' as we thurned scootin' up the Deeps, the wind hauled more west till prisintly we're jammed in the teeth av ut, goin' full an' by.* At noon there's half a gale an' we've lost mains'l, jib an' stays'l. For the rest we've retched no further than the Oaze. Tom Mace comes an' sthands besoide me at the wheel.

"'Micky,' he sez, 'we're doin' nothin' undher these onmintionable rags. Let us have her an' git ready the mud-hook.' So I let go an' wint forid. Half an hour later we are lyin' to anchor. Two hours more an' we've parted ouir cable an' ut's blowin' a shmokin' gale straight dhown the river funnel. Be three o'clock the *Flyin' Cloud's* lyin' in the shpume that's roarin' across Gillman,† an' Tom Mace an' the rest av us are lashed in the riggin' waitin' for the end av thin's.

"But it wasn't to be there; oh, no. For out av the smother comes the *Sthorm Cock*, creepin' seaward an' lookin' fer throuble. They spot us, pick us aff an' run us up to the Haven.‡ But the *Flyin' Cloud*, ye'll moind, wass a mere scatherin' av planks an' spars an' ribs av timber, lyin' fast on the edge av Gillman. All the rest is shakin's."

The mate puffed at his pipe and leaned back comfortably reminiscent. A swell sent down by a passing steamer tumbled the sea crashing on the sands and set the *Bluebell* rolling. Far in the darkness the sails whanged; a loose capstan bar clattered noisily in the scuppers. Saunderson leaped from his seat and stood a moment pointing, like a hound on scent, then, relighting his pipe, he leaned truculently against the skylight: "Lumme," he asserted, "I'd almost forgot we're here."

Micky Doolan cast up his eyes with sparrow-like vivacity and replied: "Ut wass just that same forgettin'," he announced, "that brought Tom Mace undher the curse. 'Ut's three miles from the Haven to Benfleet over a lonely road, an' the skipper

*i. e., steering by the wind. †A sand bank. ‡Thames Haven.

wass not in the mood for trampin'. 'Ut's easier,' he sez, 'to go by river.' So he, wid Dick, goes up an' borrows a boat an' makes all ready to hook a stheamer that's comin' up Reach. 'Don't do ut, Tom,' sez I, 'ut's death.' 'Go to blazes, Micky,' sez he; 'I'm to keep me promise wid the auld woman.' An' wid that they shove aff an' row out av the Haven.

"Ut's a Scotchman that's comin' tearin' up sthrame. There's enough say to tow anny boat undher; but Tom Mace an' Dick have said they'll do ut. So they row out fast to meet her. Prisintly Dick takes both oars an' we see Tom standin' to clear his line.

"Mother av God! annywan could have seen how 'twould be—as well thry to hitch the Chatham express—as well—just. Ut's dusk, ye'll moind, an' the Scotchman's comin' along wid the squirm av a torpedo boat dancin' up her sthem. In a minute she's up wid them—foamin' to the eyes. Tom Mace is sthandin' in the bows ready wid his hook. Dick is thurnin' the boat toward her. That's all we see before the stheamer passes.

"'He can't do ut,' sez a chap be me soide, 'ut's foolishness.'

"'But he has done ut,' sez I, for at that minute the boat swims aft an' we can see Tom payin' out the line quick as light—an' thin—an' thin! Arroo! whhat's happened? The end, Captin—the end.

"Av a sudden the boat jerks ahead wid a curl av foam about her. Dick shoots over the stern, an' Tom Mace loies dhown loike a sick snake in the bows. He's twistin'—that's plain. A wave av spray washes acrass them. They go out an' back, loike a fish at the end av a line, an' in that rush Tom Mace follows in the path av the rest, an' Dick has gone to keep him company."

The mate fell back on the skylight and Saunderson rose.

He walked slowly up and down the deck, a dead pipe between his lips. He had no thought of relighting it. He lounged over the rail and leaning on his elbow stole a glance at his companion. He spoke after a while with a disdainful expression: "Stow it, Micky, you an' your curse. Lumme! turn over the page an' give us the sequel now we're in the humour."

The mate eyed him with a quizzical glance. "That, maybe, is on the road to meet ye, Captin," he returned, "but loike Tom Mace, ye won't know ut till ut's here."

"Chks!" said Saunderson with an oath. "Give it a rest an' come below for a taste of rum. Lumme! you want ballast, mate—that's what you want."

The skipper was in rollicking spirits. Apparently, too, he was quite unconcerned, when, towards one o'clock, a vivid blaze flashed through the dim cabin. Both men leaped to their feet. Each had taken more than a taste of rum in the heat of discussion, and their heads were none the clearer for the indulgence.

They tumbled up the companion to the accompaniment of an ear-splitting crash as the thunder rolled to the zenith. The schooner trembled like a train suddenly checked by the vacuum brake; her cable jingled in the hawse-pipe. Darkness shrouded her. She lay like a wounded gull, with drooping head and shivering wings, watching the approach of her enemy disconsolately from the lap of the swell. The sails bellied and clanged alternately. From somewhere the lightning played without pause, darting about, twisting, snapping, leaping. The sea caught the gleams. It mirrored them incessantly, added to them, spread them out to examine. It was as though the black surface, so still and profoundly impassive, were a giant forge whereon some Titan worked with his bellows.

Calm, dark and very sombre it appeared as they attuned

their eyes to see; then a sudden and angry spirit of rain rushed upon them and Saunderson faced about.

"Call the chaps out, Micky. Look slippy, my son," he cried. "Aft wiv 'em! Get these flamin' kites handed."*

He moved across the deck, masterful, vigilant, staring into the void and snapping orders.

The squall broke. It sprang upon them with a deluge, stinging their faces, lashing their hands as with flicks of a driver's whip. It caught the half-set canvas and the sails roared out in a whanging chorus. Someone shouted, "Let all stand!" and the men drew back under the bulwarks. But Saunderson discovered their retreat and came forward. He took one by the ear and led him to the ropes. "Pull!" he admonished, "snug 'em up!"

The man accepted his fate without speech.

For half an hour the meagre crew fought and swore in the turmoil. They were sodden. They worked without heart. They knew that their efforts were futile, absurd, that they accomplished nothing—still, under Saunderson's eye, they pulled, waiting for the squall to fail. It died as it rose, suddenly, and the *Bluebell* was newly lighted. Little spirit fires crept out to mock the fading wind. They perched eerily on masts and yard-arms. They slithered in balls of flame up and down the stays and woodwork mimicking the lightning, mimicking the flash and revolution of those lights out there in the mirk—but the men took no heed. They continued pulling with the dogged persistency of a will not theirs until Saunderson moved to stay them. He approached the mate with bent head, staring at the flickering lights, shouting, half in anger: "Get aft, ye blithering Irishman, an' take the wheel. Avast hauling! We're adrift. Make sail."

*Stow the sails.

As Doolan hastened to obey, his voice rose with new orders: "Loose the brails. Stays'l halliards there, one of you! Stoppers off the mains'l, boy. Move around! Look slippy!"

The crew bustled with alacrity under his eye; but in the confusion of tangled ropes, rain and unutterable darkness, only small progress had been made before the mate's voice was heard. He came forward at a run, crying out: "No use—no use! She's aground!"

Saunderson gripped him by the arm. "She's where, ye little cockchafer?" he growled.

"On the san's. No man will move her this side av tide toime—let go me arm."

He spoke in the confident tones of one who has prophesied correctly and now awaits further events in peace. He watched the skipper as he moved aft; saw him try the wheel; remarked on the fact that the rudder was jammed hard on the sands; watched as he came back to the mainmast and halted, ostensibly to give an order to the crew. But Saunderson only fumbled with the buttons of his coat, staring into space.

The squall hummed faintly, far on the horizon.

Three hours later the skipper sat alone on deck noting the lights which leaped and blinked on a silvered river. The moon was up. High water past. The Gat shimmered at his elbow. A curious sheen hung over all, misty, white, indefinite. The *Bluebell* no longer trembled on the edge of the sands, she lay where they had wharped her, comfortably afloat and swinging slowly to the ebb; tide-bound, wind-bound—motionless amidst the wide expanse.

Saunderson watched her. He marked the river running in streaks, oily, sluggish, without a curl of foam; he saw the lights blinking, leaping from grave to gay and heard again those suggestions he found so appalling but could not shake

off. He admitted that they were absurd; but the notion had fastened upon him, his brain had grappled with it and he desired above all things the knowledge of men who knew; who could judge, who, unlike the mate, could reason this matter to a finality. He told himself there was something in it and immediately shook his head, doggedly shouting that it was rot. He sat back, tried to smoke, thought of sleep, thought of the face of a fair girl at home, in Abbeyville, but could not give her the attention she deserved. He banged the rail with his clenched fist.

The crew slept. Micky Doolan slept. But Saunderson did not sleep—he watched.

And as he sat there brooding, a steamer crawled out of the mists and, passing like a phantom, vanished in the sheen of the moon. The thud of her propeller droned in his ears. He looked round, but the vessel was gone. He strove to pierce the illusive light, seeking her shape, and found himself listening to a cry, a cry so faint as to be almost soundless.

He sprang to the side, intent, alert, and again it rang out—a commonplace hail; a thing the river is used to. Some one called for assistance. Saunderson, standing gripping hands with fear, scarcely hesitated. He told himself that some one was drowning and started aft at speed.

"A man overboard! Chaps to the boat!" he cried. "Lively's the word!"

The crew slept on till Micky Doolan roused them; then they, too, crept on deck. But Saunderson had made no pause. Undeterred by their absence he clambered into the boat and sculled away in the track of that mist-hidden steamer. The men waited.

They were still on deck and the mate smoking at the head of the companion when the skipper returned. He climbed

the rail, made fast the boat and faced the Gat in silence. The mate crossed to meet him.

"Did ye get a soight av him?" he questioned. Saunderson sprang round. He stood chewing the cud of stumbling sentences; but he made no answer.

"Thin he's dhrowned?" said the mate.

"Drowned?—Gawd knows."

"But ye saw him, Captin?"

"I saw—Gawd! what's that?"

He twisted on his heel. Nothing appeared—only the Gat was there; the Gat and the sheen and a group of staring men. He hastened into the cabin.

An hour later the mate followed. Saunderson was sitting at the table sunk in thought. At his side was a pannikin of rum from which he drank at intervals. He took no notice of Doolan's entrance, but he watched him, saw him light his pipe, pull his cap down and turn in.

Towards daylight Saunderson's deep voice sounded and the mate awoke. The skipper was leaning forward with a curious gleam in his sloe-black eyes. He caught the mate's glance and his face twisted into a leer.

"Ya-as, Micky," he cried, "maybe you're right; but I never got a-nigh him. Who says I didn't try? Lies—all lies an' gibberish. Who could when there's—You're right! The honey-pots will be my mark for a while——"

He had fallen into the river idiom—the river which swirled muddily out there, yellow in the light of the rising sun.

CHAPTER II

Susie Watches a Procession

ABBEYVILLE lay adrowse at the edge of the Thames. It stared at the river through a shimmering heat wave, marking the growing flood, the passing ships, the tugs, the barges, liners and tramps; it saw that they all moved onward, stole round the deep-set bay, passed the training ships, the buoys, the long-armed jetties and disappeared in a golden blur at the head of the reach—it knew that London awaited them, that London would presently absorb them.

Abbeyville loungers especially noted the coming of high tide. For hours a group of men had waited, patiently consuming tobacco at the verge of the deep water pier. Their eyes were generally turned seaward. They said to each other, that unless the Conservancy hurried its fingers the schooner would not fetch the blocks. They bemoaned the fact that they had prepared them a tide too soon, sweating uselessly in a broiling sun; then leaning on spars and anchors, against spare buoys, timber ends and the tangled debris of a ship-yard, watched the smoke floating in long gray streams from tall gray chimneys across the water; watched the slim finger of land at the eastern boundary of the bay; watched the tug lying idle close at hand with the steam melting softly into the clear, hot air. They seemed to find the occupation soothing.

Behind them Abbeyville basked in a noon-day sun. The people were hot and languid. Flies buzzed persistently in a halo about the head of an old horse trying to sleep on three

legs outside the High Street stores; and crawled like nervously excitable currants inside the grocer's window, sampling the sugar. The street was thirsty, full of dust; the men lounging near the smithy were thirsty also. The Abbeyville Urban Board had essayed to slake the streets; the Southern Trader had done something towards slaking the men. They spoke together in many intonations, relating, in a strange dialect, dreary stories of questionable taste, until one standing on the verge of the wharf cried out:

"That's 'er."

Another removed his pipe, stared into the scintillating river-scape and said, "If it ain't—lumme!"

His companions seemed to consider that this settled the matter. They moved forward in a group and stood watching until a noise grew out of the stillness, and they saw that the tug had cast off and had commenced to slap the river with her paddles. She crept over the still water and made for the beacon on Deadman's Point—a long and lean finger of land jutting out from the shore at the end of the bay. A procession stole slowly up river here. It consisted of a tug boat with twin black funnels towing two lopsided lighters and between them the angled masts of a schooner. At the main was a green flag carrying the symbol "Wreck" in white letters.

Some one said, "It's Win'bag—that's a moral," and a thinner voice falsettoed, "Win'bag—'ooze 'ee?"

An old graybeard spat thoughtfully over the wharf side and remarked with huge disdain, "'Er skipper"; then added as if in justification of his tone, "W'ere's yer 'ead?"

The falsetto said, "On me shoulders, a course." But the graybeard took exception to the description. He replied very assertively, "Garn! it's a cabbage. Go 'ome an' get it biled fer dinner." He turned to face the procession, muttering:

"Them uz don't know Win'bag, don't know a man uz they should know. Them uz 'as lived a year in Abbeywill an' don't know Win'bag, might uz well a bin dead." Again he resumed his pipe and contemplative attitude. No one resented his remarks.

The twin-funnelled tug snorted laboriously round the point, breathing deep blobs of smoky breath; she lashed the water into a mill race and it fell white, crammed with bubbles, in the way of the lopsided trio, and the trio trod them underfoot. The tug which had moved from the buoy approached and stood on beside the wreck flag. But she did not assist, she watched; for no outsider must interfere with a Conservancy procession when the green flag is hoisted, lest there be war in that part of Trinity Square which loves leisurely methods.

The men on the deep water pier observed this manœuvre and commented on the *Petrel's* sagacity. "It's one for Elliott; there's no two ways abaht that," said the spokesman.

"Win'bag won't like Elliott bein' sent to pluck 'im in," another averred; "'tain't likely."

"An' the gel watchin' the pair of 'em from the bottom of 'er garding. It's not wot you might call a bean-feast fer Win'bag."

"It means 'is walkin' ticket—that's wot it means," added a lean shipwright with a long and silky moustache. "It's rough on Win'bag—bloomin' rough."

The graybeard sage withdrew his pipe and looked about him. "Fat lot Win'bag cares for the flourishin' sack," he announced. "Win'bag's got money, 'ee 'as—ull be leader o' the Rivermen's Union yet, 'ee will. A good chap. 'Ard uz nails. Strong. Knows a thing or two. 'Ear 'im talk—it licks."

As no one ventured to contradict this statement he proceeded to drive it home. " 'Ear 'im afore you judge 'im. I

say uz 'ee'll lead. Mark that." He subsided into the abstract gaze of a man asleep with his eyes open.

The blacksmith approached and stood with his mate beside the group. He cried out, "Socks!" Then after a moment given to contemplation: "Jock, lad, blow oop t'fire. Ah'm lookin' at ma fortune—ah'm goin' t' be busy." No one noticed him. All were intent on the procession. The sun drew figure-pictures in the dust, long, clear-cut lines in blue, which the wharf was not wide enough to finish.

Farther down stream, nearer the ambling causeway sloping to cool its heels in the river, a girl stood also on watch. She wore a pink gown, a straw hat with a trailing black feather, and the air of one quietly absorbed. The sun revelled about her, lighting the curves, darkening the shadows, touching discriminately the golden hair. It threw its arms about her and she leaned over the garden fence undismayed, intent on the *Stormy Petrel*, that paddle-wheel tug which ambled so circumspectly beside the procession. The girl was Susie Sutcliffe and she might have stood for a statue of Hebe.

Behind her, at the end of the small garden, was her home, a house built of weather-boards and red brick, nearly hidden in the grip of a giant wistaria. All her life she had lived there. As a child she had played about the rose trees and syringa, had tended the unordered array of geraniums, pansies, fuchsias. She loved the garden and was happy in it. That she might have been happier all men were prepared to admit. But she was the daughter of "poor" George Sutcliffe, a coasting skipper who was ruled by the wife he had taken when Susie's mother died; and the home contained echoes of a voice and a bickering tongue difficult to associate with the air of refinement noticeable in the girl; difficult to consider possible in surroundings so calm and full of peace.

At the edge of the garden the river gurgled and at high water it lapped greedily at the fence which bordered it. Across the way was a lighthouse, a small iron construction standing on thin, straddled legs sunk in the mud. It blinked all night straight into Susie's room. Below the causeway were the training ships, the yachts and the wide, sweeping reach ending in the finger of land at Deadman's Point. Before her was the wide and mysterious Thames, crammed with ships, crammed with steamers, full of life, vast, indefinite, hazy, dim.

It was the river which held her. As a child she had learned to love its voice and to know its moods. It had no terrors for her. Her father lived upon it—came home in the old, old *Tantalus* carrying her presents from the unpierced distance beyond the point. Jack Elliott lived upon it—he who now moved with his tug beside the procession drawing each moment nearer; who commanded the *Stormy Petrel;* who was her lover.

Together, as children, these two had played upon its banks; together, when they were little more, they had paddled about the still back waters and come triumphant through childish perils; and together, in the more troublesome present, they had learned to love; learned, too, that Mrs. Sutcliffe favoured other ties. Now they stood in happy ignorance of incidents neither could foresee.

The pictures were beautiful, the memories transcendent always until that strenuous voice, so cold and sharp, intervened; then they were tinged with gray—like the river under wintry skies whose distance is always mist. Saunderson caused the grayness—Saunderson and the voice.

Susie leaned over the fence staring at the procession now approaching the head of the bight. Slowly, like an overturned beetle with wriggling legs, it crept behind the twin-funnelled

tug, came near, and sent three spirts of steam into the blue. The men lounging on the deep water pier accepted this hint and some of them started down the narrow strip of foreshore. They passed beneath the garden, growling as they went:

"Might a knowed it. 'Ee's not goin' to risk 'is bloomin' tug atwixt the buoys. That's wot that means. An' we've bin sweatin' to ready the ways. Lumme! it's thick."

Some one else said, "I'd give suthin' to see Dunscombe's face w'en 'ee knows." And the old graybeard, passing stolidly behind, squelching through the mud in boots that reached his thighs, took up his parable.

"Never you mind the Guv'nor's face. Win'bag knows 'ow to deal wi' 'im: mark my words."

They squelched onward, straggled past the pier-master's hutch, climbed the causeway and became specks at the edge of the park; specks standing on the sea-wall, waving arms, catching ropes, and behaving like excitable marionettes. The tug with the twin funnels snorted viciously onward; swerved, hauled in a hawser, and left the beetle to its own devices.

A tiny speck moved over the water heading shoreward. Susie knew that it was a boat carrying a line to the marionettes. Presently they began to walk heavily across the green and the beetle became dismembered. Two low, flat lighters floated now on even keels; the centre, the part which most resembled the legs of the beetle, trailed shoreward following the rope. Lamely and in visible disorder it assumed the shape and semblance of a schooner which the *Stormy Petrel*, daring at length to intervene, came upon and pushed until she heeled at the edge of the bank. Then the marionettes drew near, tied her securely to posts and the tug flapped noisily up river.

As it passed the garden a man came to the starboard paddle box and waved his cap. Susie took out her handkerchief and held it aloft. The two continued flourishing until distance swallowed the signals.

The river yawned sleepily between.

CHAPTER III

Saunderson Seeks Advice

A WOMAN clad in black, tall and straight and acid, with narrow brow and deep-lined face, stood in the roadway viewing the people returning from chapel. Abbeyville High Street meandered crookedly behind and before her. The setting sun tinged its length with golden hues; but she saw no beauty in its irregularity, no tones on the gabled roofs, the old red tiles and weather-beaten walls. She considered the stucco villas on the hill, fenced in behind grim iron railings and with sentinel pillars guarding each portal, as more adapted to her "spear"; and loathed the sight of her husband's domain as inappropriate to her dignity.

She was one of those persons who, in educated circles, are marked more by their antipathies than by their judgment; who develop a rabid and outspoken hatred of all things sane, and come generally to be labelled with the prefix *anti.* But Mrs. Sutcliffe's education had been gleaned in the days of darkness and finished by the acerbities of barter in the small and dingy shop her father kept across the way. By her marriage with "Capting" Sutcliffe she had lifted herself into a "professional spear," but she retained her acidity, her dialect, and a tongue before which mankind quailed.

It was said in Abbeyville that Mrs. Sutcliffe "couldn't look pleased if she wanted, nater havin' provided contrairywise." It was also said that Mrs. Sutcliffe was a "cawf-drop" the captain could not assimilate, and the village opined that the old

man was "blessed wiv the patience of Jove, or he'd a trundled her back to 'er marras." But as that process involved the breaking of a tie deemed indissoluble, and the discussion of woes in a court of law, Mrs. Sutcliffe retained her position.

She stood now in the village street eyeing the passers and waiting for Saunderson. She searched the people as they came out of the sun-glare and her eyes snapped. Some saw her, others failed altogether to respond to her grim nod and passed on ringing the changes of unkind criticism. In truth, for all her assumption of the Christian virtues, Mrs. Sutcliffe was an unpopular woman in Abbeyville. Her phraseology was a synthesis of the chapel she loved and the river she hated. Her temper had become honestly venomous with advancing years. Religion had long ago sapped what gentleness had been hers and the practices of a dreary creed had brought her to look upon all beauty as anathema, all gaiety as of the devil, all charity as a guise wherein to cloak man's indigence.

She gazed out upon the world through the narrow compass of her chapel windows and passed a crooked judgment on all whose faces betokened happiness. Religious exercises had superseded the vigilance of her earlier household economy, and Sutcliffe had come within sight of a paltry ruin, a ruin all the more pitiful to see, because of the man's strenuous efforts to eke out ways and means and keep Susie ignorant of what was impending.

Mrs. Sutcliffe turned towards her home. It seemed that Saunderson did not intend to keep his appointment, but as she neared her gate the man appeared at the end of the street. He came from the park where the schooner lay like a toy, stranded at the edge of the green. Mrs. Sutcliffe moved to meet him and they gripped hands.

"What cheer, mother?" the skipper asked in his deep voice, "and how goes Mr. Slowboy after the address? Tired, I'll warrant."

"The Lawd giveth an' the Lawd taketh away," said the woman with but little hesitation, for she was newly equipped by a two-hour exercise. "I doubt Mr. Slowboy has found strength from 'is wrastle wi' Satan. But 'ow's yourself? I hear of troublous times; of the sinkin' of ships an' the drownin' of the ri-chus. Is it true, my friend, or has an enemy spread lies?"

Saunderson cast a look towards the toy at the foot of the park. "Aye," he said, "I've been caught. The *Bluebell's* down the cellar—at least, that's where she was; now she's yonder."

Mrs. Sutcliffe reached out and laid an encouraging hand on the big man's sleeve. "Thy ways are not My ways, saith the Lawd Gawd of 'Ostes. Let not your heart be cast down—it were Gawd's will."

Saunderson viewed this pronouncement with some impatience. "I don't know about that," he said. "The *Bluebell* was good enough for me. I doubt if Gawd had much to do wiv it—it's more the fault of a—a drunken collier."

"Not a sparrow falleth to the ground but wot My Father which is in 'Eaven seeth it," Mrs. Sutcliffe averred in positive tones. "A drunken collier is a missal of the Most 'Igh, sent to punish us for sins we've committed; not," she cumbrously apologised, "not that you 'ave committed them, but one of your crew may. For the Lawd, if so be He had intended you to avoid 'Is wrath, would a turned the collier inta the bank—even as 'Ee turned Balaam's ass in the road over against Baalpeor."

Saunderson watched her out of narrowed eyes. He knew

nothing of the quotation; had never heard of Balaam's ass; but at the back of his mind he perceived that Mrs. Sutcliffe's judgment was also the judgment of Micky Doolan, the meandering spinner of yarns which fell true. He glanced up with a question which might, perchance, test the matter. "Then," he said, "you hold that ships don't sink wivout Gawd's orders?"

"Never, Capting."

"Nor men drown?"

"Never, Capting."

"An' you believe that Gawd takes charge of every move—pushes men an' women about like you or me pushes drafts on a checker board?"

"There is nothin' hid from My sight, saith the Lawd. Never was, never will be—world without hend—amen."

"An' what happens to a man when he dies? Is he dead all ends up—soul, spirit—the whole caboodle?"

"The spirit never dies; it lives an' moves an' 'as a bein'."

"Ah, so I've heard."

"As the Spirit of Gawd moved on the face of the waters after the flood, so the spirits of the dead move about and keep watch."

Saunderson considered the matter a moment in silence. He gazed through an alleyway at the foot of which the river ran babbling in the dying light. It carried, according to this creed, on its bosom, ships that would reach harbour, ships that would not; crews predestined to go to Heaven, crews predestined to go to Hell—all at the will of God; without explanation, without preparation. Saunderson squared his shoulders and faced about speaking with renewed vigour.

"What's done's done," he decided. "If there's a cause there's a cause—an' whimperin' won't alter it. But, it seems to me, that if this is the way of it, Gawd might have arranged

to let me know what I've done that's wrong—an' given me a chance—just a chance." He paused a moment still staring at the moving river, then broke out afresh: "We aren't saints—none of us. I've had my innings—put in better than forty years; but I can't see where I've worked for this—this—Chks!" again he hung a moment in thought, then resumed on an entirely new issue. "You see," he said, "the trouble is the *Bluebell's* not finished. She's been picked up, towed home, an' will have to go on the ways. Now if I had lost her clean the boot would have been on the other leg. The Guv'nor wouldn't have kicked up nasty, for the schooner's done her time. It might have been worth twenty pound to me; but now," Saunderson snapped his fingers, "now it's worth about that."

Mrs. Sutcliffe sighed. "It's a wicked, thankless world, Capting, an' the ways of the rich is percurious."

"It's a world cram jam full of manopolies," he returned with some heat. "Steamers is manopolies. They fair get my hair out of curl. They think the river is built for them an' no one else has a right to be afloat. Lumme! there's a day coming when I'll show them a thing or two—steamship owners, factory owners—chks! sweaters of the poor I call them, wiv their wage cuttin' an' their machinery an' what not. Wait a bit. You'll see."

He walked truculently beside her until they reached the gate and Mrs. Sutcliffe halted with her finger on the latch. "You'll do great things," she replied. "My heart goes out in synthapy to you; but you'll step in. The gell's there."

"Not much use—how is she?" He hesitated.

"As well as can be expected of any gell as wastes 'er time readin' books an' holds aloof from the Lawd's 'ouse."

As Saunderson made no rejoinder she added after a pause:

"It's time some good man took 'er in hand, Capting—that's wot I think."

"She's a good scholar," he returned, "what I'm not. What I'd give my earnings to be, now, every stiver."

Mrs. Sutcliffe watched him with flickering eyes. She had no mind to allow this matter to drag; but that Susie should be praised was too much for her equanimity. She cried out: "An' aren't you 'er match in a thousand ways? In book learnin' Susie may know more—does, I doubt; but wot good 'as it done 'er? Where's she the better for the vicar's 'elp? He took her in 'and—'she's clever,' 'ee says to himself; 'I'll putt 'er through the mill, an' we can get 'er cheap for the schools,' 'ee thinks. So 'ee putt 'er through an' she's assistant mistress now—got 'er place a fortnight ago. 'Ee'd better a left 'er to assist 'er mother. 'Ee's proselyted 'er out of the chapel an' made 'er a candle for the church. Presently, when she's done 'er turn, out she'll go, an' I ast you, wot's to come of 'er then. She'll be old. Capting, why don't you take 'er in 'and to once?"

Saunderson's dark face grew flushed, but he stammered like one ashamed: "She won't look at me—won't look at me. It's Elliott she wants."

Mrs. Sutcliffe sniffed her contempt. She turned on him with an expressive gesture. "A man," she announced grimly, "can always make a way. You want her. You aren't easily put aside. Elliott's nobody. Say so."

He smote his hands together crying out almost fiercely; "I love her. I'd give my soul to win her. I'd give my chances of bein' head of the Union—a thing I'm near. I'd give all I have—all; but she loves Elliott—sees no one else. I'm not in the same street with him—what can a man do?"

Mrs. Sutcliffe advanced a step and laid her hand on his arm.

"She doesn't care more for him than you," she averred; "it's a toss up which she takes. A maid always plays her fish—why shouldn't she? Besides Elliott's a fool an' doesn't mean marryin', if you ask me. You 'old the key, too. I put it in your 'and long since. If you're so keen set why don't you use it."

Saunderson breathed hard. The suggestion opened a new heaven to him. He had no idea that he had so staunch an ally; but the woman's words left no misapprehension in his mind. He replied eagerly, "I will use it. If you'll help me, I will use it."

Mrs. Sutcliffe gripped him by the hand. "I'll help you," she whispered. "I'll make her throw up Elliott—ah' if she won't I'll make her so as she'll be glad to take any man's 'and that's offered—it's fer you to do the rest."

Saunderson smiled. "It's a pity there aren't more of your sort, mother," he said. "It would ease things mightily in this weary world."

She turned to him with a dolorous inflection. "You've 'ad your troubles, Capting, I doubt. But Gawd's mercy is on them as fear 'Im, an' the gell will make you forget wot's gone before."

This latter she put in as an afterthought; then with a sigh of infinite regret for the wickedness of mankind, she entered the garden.

Saunderson latched the gate.

. . . . . .

Viewed superficially there was no great divergence in the appearance of these two men. Both were tall and strong, both were bronzed, both spoke the language of the Thames—but here analogy ends, for of them Elliott was impulsive,

generous, and hot-tempered, while Saunderson was vindictive, brooding, savage. Elliott young and plastic, Saunderson a man of opinions, a man well advanced in the forties.

A glance into the strong face of this Regenerator of the Masses would have revealed to the physiognomist a singularly flaccid mouth and powerful jaw. Criticism would have pointed with disdainful finger to the fact that the straight brow was counteracted by sensuous lips and a head overweighted at the base of the skull. Suggestions would have crept in: possibilities by a turn of the pen would have become actualities, and Saunderson would have found himself written down "dangerous."

It was the face and head of a strong and brainy man of meagre education; of one who watched the social problems through the narrow glass of ignorance; who recognised the misery of the crowded alleys, the luxury of the mansions; who saw the unequal distribution of wealth and knew, by personal contact, of the grinding and sweating by which men grow rich. But, on the other hand, he knew nothing of the methods by which these problems may be attacked; knew only that it was what he called "Gawd's truth," and set himself to arrange "the anomalies" in his own crude fashion.

His eloquence had gained him the name of Windbag along the river side, which was in itself a tribute to the intelligence of his friends. Indeed the man had earned it. For a worker was never dismissed, wages never fell, nor was there ever a strike or paltry labour trouble of any kind, but he championed "the cause" and preached the doctrine of communism with the fervent heat of one of nature's orators.

With less education he would have grovelled contentedly in the ruck of his tribe; with more he would have made a powerful thinker, preacher, or leader—for, with education and sys-

tematic drill, that lack of self-control, which was his bane, would have disappeared and left him to a life of commonplace aims.

It was Saunderson's fate continually to run his head against a brick wall. He knew that the wall was there and had some notion of its quality; but he had not sufficient wisdom to attack it with diplomacy. What learning he had simply tended to exasperate him with the conditions in which he moved. He had lived hard and struggled to save. He desired to learn, but passion stood in his path. His ambition was to lead a winning fight against the masters, and nothing had come to soften him till Susie crossed his path. And at this time, when he was halting, perhaps for the first time, on the verge of better things; when the contagion of the girl's more refined nature bade him live higher if he would compete for her affections; then, in that hour, came the disastrous passage from the Gat.

Most men would have thrown the whole incident to the winds; but in Saunderson's mind the memory grew like a festering wound until it permeated his whole being. His slipshod knowledge, his haunting dread of things unseen, the rapidity with which this thing had come upon him, hot on the heels of the story, all conspired to place it in the forefront.

The *Bluebell* had come under the curse. She was "down the cellar." Micky Doolan had foreseen this thing. These were the facts which appeared.

CHAPTER IV

Mrs. Sutcliffe Deals the Cards

MRS. SUTCLIFFE stood at the door of her house. She expected Susie and waited for her, hot with the memory of her talk with that protégé of hers, Saunderson. Susie should have been at home. It was an opportunity. Mrs. Sutcliffe said so with thin lips as she searched the roadway.

For days scarcely a sentence had passed between these two. The long series of bickerings had culminated in a sort of armed truce; neither would give way an inch. It was a position which had grown out of small and inconsiderable beginnings. The difference in their ages, the bitterness engendered by the fact that Susie was her husband's child, not hers, the affection the old man lavished on his daughter—all tended to sharpen the hostility which had existed from the earliest days of their companionship. Susie was educated, Mrs. Sutcliffe was not; Susie was guarded by the church on the hill, Mrs. Sutcliffe was a follower of "Passon Slowboy" and worshipped at a Bethel; Susie had no household duties to perform, Mrs. Sutcliffe told herself she had enough and to spare. She said too, when presently she perceived a trim form moving down the street, that the "gell's" defiant and rather supercilious manner was insufferable.

She found no grace in the easy pose of that tall young figure, no beauty in the gentle curves and dainty habiliments—the latter she averred belonged indubitably to the

devil; the rest, as far as she could see, was well on the road thither.

Susie entered the garden, latched the gate, and passed into the kitchen. Mrs. Sutcliffe followed, speaking acridly.

"W'en I was a gell," she announced, "I dusn't flounce past me mother as though she's dirt. I'd a got as comfortable a spankin' as 'ere or there a one—an' small blame to 'em for lickin' me. I were trained to treat me mother with respect—'adn't any father or passon to take me part. That's 'ow I were brought up."

Susie watched the narrow anger-laden eyes with complete indifference and continued to unpin her hat without remark.

"Nothin' excuses insalence to gray 'airs," Mrs. Sutcliffe continued aggressively. "Nothin' is more contrairy to the teachin' of Gawd's 'Oly Book—ast the Reverend Mister Hoakley if so be you doubt my words. I'm speakin' to you, Miss," she added pointedly.

Susie looked over her. For the moment she appeared to be engaged in studying the ceiling, but she said, "That, surely, requires no explanation: well?"

"It's eddication that's done it," Mrs. Sutcliffe resumed with mournful resignation; "if father 'ad done 'is dooty by me, it isn't the wickerage that 'ud 'av 'ad the benefit of yer hours of idleness, nor the schools, but me that's workin' me fingers to the blessed bone to keep you in vittals. You're too good fer the likes of us; it's time you were married."

"Judging from what one sees," Susie returned with a laugh, "marriage is not always an Eldorado."

Mrs. Sutcliffe paused, sniffing at the simile. Suspicion stood large in her eyes. "Whom the Lawd joineth together let no man thrust assender," she answered, vaguely conscious

that the girl was sneering at her, and taking shelter, as was her wont, in biblical quotation.

"Thanks," said Susie cheerfully. "I'm in no hurry. Some day perhaps."

"Give me a man," Mrs. Sutcliffe broke in pointedly, "as 'as steadied down an' is able to make a home for a gell wivout any long-winded walkin's-out—for with years cometh discretion, saith the Lawd Gawd of 'Ostes."

"With years also come ague, rheumatism, and many other things," said Susie. "Indeed I prefer youth to age. You did, I expect, when you were a girl."

Mrs. Sutcliffe's face showed that she understood to a nicety this remark. Her voice when next she spoke rang sharply didactic; but she avoided the point at issue. "A gell should seek guidance of the Lawd an' of her mother," she cried, "an' I say, as I've said before, give me a man that's sowed 'is hoats an' will settle down comferable. That's the man fer my money an' you won't set eyes on a steadier, more Gawd-fearin' Christian man than Capting Saundisson."

"Saunderson!" Susie returned with a slight accent on the name, "you misjudge him, surely; besides, I could not marry him."

"W'y not, Miss Pert—ain't 'ee good enough fer you?"

"Oh, yes—he is too good."

"I should like to a seen the man I thought too good fer me at your age," came the answer with a sniff of derision.

The girl turned round with sudden earnestness. "You don't want me to marry a man I hate, do you? I hate Jim Saunderson and I love Jack. When he is ready I will go away and not trouble you with my presence; but to your friend, I will give nothing—only hate."

"You can give him what you like," the other sneered, "w'en you've married him."

Susie took no notice. She attempted to pass, but Mrs. Sutcliffe barred the way. "An' as fer that Jack Elliott," she asserted leaning forward, hands on hips, "it's my belief 'ee don't mean marryin'."

"That isn't true and you know it."

Mrs. Sutcliffe came nearer. "I know more than that about 'im," she cried out, then paused watching the girl through narrow eyes. Again, with a burst of candour; "Susie, lissen to me. There's no room fer you an' me in this 'ouse. You are yer father's gell, not mine; but I'm 'is wife an' I mean to stay. Very well; there's two chaps danglin' after you. One's a fool wiv more than one maid at 'is 'eels, with no money, an' p'raps a year or more of waitin' before 'im. The other's a man, money in 'and, all ready to take you over. You choose the man, me gell, an' I'm your friend fer life; choose the other an' we part. That's straight an' so you understand."

Susie made no reply. The suggestion seemed to strike her as ludicrous. "Enemy for life!" she cried. "What else have you always been? I love Jack. I am his. I will never marry another."

Mrs. Sutcliffe's eyes took a derisive gleam. She threw back her head and again her arms were akimbo. "Bless my soul!" she broke out, "Lissen to it then. La, lissen to it! Lawd!" she continued brutally and with a sudden change of manner, "you'd best be chary wot you give to any man, me gell, ontil you've got the ring on yer finger."

Susie made no response. She stood staring into the vindictive eyes, marking the narrow brow, the thin, set lips, and wondering when she would be in a position to refute these statements, all so unjust to her lover. But Mrs. Sutcliffe was

concerned more with her own than with Susie's thoughts and speculations. And again came the stinging voice, grimly breaking the silence.

"Aye," it said, "fer gells as give theirselves away wi'out the 'elp of the passon, is app to get left wi' nothin' else to give away —'cept, maybe, the baby."

Susie flushed hotly and caught up her hat. She left the house without further speech, her ears tingling, her eyes aflame. She would never argue again. She hated herself for having done so now. She felt the uselessness of explanation with one whose sole weapon was a venomous tongue, backed by abuse of the only man on earth, her lover.

She came to the park. Here at least there would be peace. Here, in the solemn evening, she could watch the flashing wavelets and speculate on the interminable fleet passing up the short reach. Here, too, she could picture Jack's surroundings and wait for his coming. If her father had been at home she would have gone to him and sobbed out her trouble on his kindly breast. But her father was away. Jack was away. There remained no one with whom she could consult.

The park at Abbeyville is a beautiful spot without the vestige of resemblance to any park extant. It is a natural wilderness, lying at the river side, consisting of a stretch of meadow, some beaten tracks, a cluster or so of gigantic beech, and here and there a rambling patch of gorse.

On the one hand clustered the village, red-tiled and picturesque; on the other, chalk cuttings clothed in valerian and partially hidden by the trees and shrubs. In the background sheltered by the high white cliffs and nestling amidst a forest of elms, stood the manor, a fine old country house slowly dying before the advancing factories. In front the river.

For an hour Susie sat on the bank watching the moving

shipping. It was nearly seven o'clock and a golden autumn sun setting behind the blue haze at the top of the reach. Out there, indistinct with the blur of coming night, lay the forest of masts and hulls without which Abbeyville never seemed complete. At wide intervals the hum of a distant horn mingled with the brisk cries of the boys playing on the training ships.

Susie leaned against an upturned boat watching the glowing scene. Among those sights and sounds she had lived her life. Here under Jack's guidance she had learned the difference between a schooner and a brig, between a fog horn bellowing mournfully on a hazy night and a steamer waking the echoes for a pilot. Here she had laughed and played and learned to love; and here, especially at the quiet hour of sunset, she often roamed when Jack was away, dreaming dreams and seeing visions of an impossible future—for the life of sordid Methodist cant which struck her so keenly at home, taught her also to reach after that perfect and ideal love which the Virginias of these pushful days usually find illusive.

A boat crossed her line of vision coming from the group of shipping, lying off the jetty. Susie did not notice it, yet she was intent on the picture spread before her. Half an hour passed. The sun went down and the sky blazed with fiery splashes. The glare sank into the girl's heart. She had forgotten her anger, she had forgotten her surroundings, her soul went out across the waters with the cry of a wounded bird:

"Jack! Oh, Jack, come and take me to you!"

She rose from her seat and turned to go home, and there, almost at her feet stood her lover. In a moment, with a cry of absolute joy, she was in his arms, her face surrendered to his kisses.

"Oh, my darling!" she whispered breathless.

"My little girl!"

"Jack, Jack, you must not go away—you must not."

He held her from him, seeking her eyes, while she as strongly strove to hide them.

"I won't, Susie; not till you come with me."

She turned to face him now, her lips quivering, her eyes bright with tears. "Jack!" she faltered and fell into silence.

"Susie!" he mocked, laughing. But she crept into his arms and clung there shivering, while he, ignorant of her trouble, explained in his firm young voice:

"It's true, Susie! I've come back to settle it. We can be married whenever you say the word. How does it happen so suddenly? Because I'm in luck. Tumbled across a god-send last trip and Dunscombe's as pleased as Punch."

She raised her head and looked at him, forgetful of her tear-stained face, forgetful of her trouble, swiftly thrilling with the hope his words had given her.

"You've been crying, lass," he remarked, examining her eyes.

"I didn't see you coming, Jack," she evaded.

"But your weren't crying about that?"

"No, Jack."

"Then what was it?"

She turned to him with a gust of passion. " Dear, it is everything—everything. I'm promised to you. Mother knows it, but she insists I am to marry Saunderson—Saunderson, her 'Chrischun Gawd-fearer' whom she loves."

"Chut!" he frowned, "we've heard that before. Not quite so plain, perhaps, but it's been there and I've seen it. Well, what does she think I am? Does she suppose I'm going to stand by and watch him take you? Does she suppose I've played the waiting game for fun? Can't she understand I wanted to find you something better than a room at the top of

Panter's Court, maybe? The Lord look sideways on her for a canting hypocrite. I have no patience with her, and she'll know it."

"Jack, Jack!" she urged rushing in to stay the storm, "don't heed her. I would not have told you but—but——"

"Yes, I know. She just bullies the life out of you, like she has the old man. Well, we'll stop it. We need not wait now. It shall end."

He spoke with the strength born of his sudden accession to wealth which might perhaps run to one hundred pounds, perhaps sink to fifty, a paltry sum on which to risk the expenses of matrimony in some circles, but in his, a fortune. Susie glanced in his face as she noted the change.

"Yes, dear," she replied, "it must end."

"When?"

"When, when—oh, Jack, when you will."

Then fell a silence; a silence as deep as that which had lasted while the sun sank in the haze; a silence filled with passionate caresses as they stood with strained arms, breast to breast, lip to lip on the high sea wall.

The crimson glare had faded from the higher horizon. Low amidst the blur and smoke of London, a bloody streak paled. Night was marching across the winding reaches and in place of the sun-tinged wavelets, lay a wide expanse of cold, gray water.

The two stood there, quietly reading each other's faces. The one, pale under the tan; the other crimson and with flashing eyes, eyes that entreated, begged for peace and happiness. Arms linked, they climbed slowly from the sea wall to find it. They skirted the grass and came to the back of the park where a hillock rose, a knoll crowned with trees and fringed with walls of blackthorn. This was the Spinney. At the summit

the ground sank into a minature dell and the bushes ran riot amidst a tangled network of roots and grass and bracken. It was a place consecrated in their memory by many an hour of happiness. Here Jack had fashioned a bower for his sweetheart; here, not long ago, he had built a rustic seat for the girl who was to be his wife when fortune smiled; and here, in the stillness of that river-girt wild, the two came once more to whisper and to dream.

In glimpses, through the trees, they could see the sheeny water and catch hints of the moving shipping; but the man heeded nothing of this. The business of his life lay face to face with nature. He had watched it in so many guises—through rain and snow, hail and sleet, with the ponderous accompaniment of heavy boots, oilskins, and wet necks, and had, in the course of time, been disillusioned. Besides, the matter in hand was love, and when a man discusses matrimony, the maiden's eyes act as loadstones and all outside influences are forgotten. Which is as it should be, even in a world so prosaic that pounds sterling stand for a man's worth, and the amount of a girl's dowry as a signal to the multitude of her chances.

So they found seats among the trees and the girl's head rested on the man's shoulder. Love throbbed in the heart of each—love and forgetfulness; the present, present; the future, nowhere. Sometimes they talked, softly, as lovers talk; sometimes they remained in silence, and perhaps the silence was the more eloquent of the twain.

It is possible to say so much without speech in the fields; it is possible to beg, to plead and gain acquiescence with the eyes alone when a cleft in the rocks is our resting-place and the sea moans at our feet. And in these dim reaches, far down by the estuary, the voice of the sea is never entirely absent.

The river has broadened. The tides come up. They sing the same song on the foreshore, the ripples break in the same fine curve, whispering, tempting, wooing—and the river folk know the moods.

To-night it wooed. A soft south wind stirred the branches overhead, but the bracken was still. The rooks slept without fear high up there where the stars peeped. The denizens of bush and cranny, grass and burrow moved about the affairs of life silent as the stars, cautiously as a field mouse standing sniffing on the threshold of home. And the man and the girl rested together without speech.

Heaven is a great silence; love is akin to it. We may, perhaps, never quite understand heaven, but love we may always understand. Not the love, you comprehend, of madame who has bartered her beauty for a consideration in diamonds; but the love of a girl and a man of the people unstained by life in a city. Nature speaks here in spite of the cynics. It speaks in spite of laws and conventions; in spite of trouble, pain or suffering. The girl looks up and takes the man's kisses; the man looks down and vows eternal constancy, eternal watchfulness—man, of whom on earth there is nothing more unstable or more careless of the future.

A storm lies brooding on the horizon—it is unworthy of consideration, "a cloud no bigger than a man's hand." The archives are dark with portent. The police courts speak eloquently of this or that futility. Mrs. Stogers has black eyes at the hand of her husband—eyes which once he praised for their beauty. Nell, formerly the belle of the village, is now mother of ten dirty-faced children and is glad of "goes of gin" to pass the time; but who sees these things? or who, at all events, heeds them?

Not a man sitting among the trees with a girl's head resting

on his shoulder. Not a girl held in his embrace, a slim, young girl who trusts him and finds him worthy to be king.

There were little rifts of talk between these two; bursts of exultation from Jack whose prowess in that matter of salvage would not go unrewarded; a note or two of plans, desires—all interspersed with kisses. Speed was the necessity from Jack's point of view. He aimed to put a stop to "these worries," by "going to Riverton to-morrow to stand before the registrar," but Susie held back here. She wished to be married properly, from church. Marriage in a registry office was not marriage at all, and besides, she desired Mr. Oakley to tie the bond and her father was necessary to render the ceremony complete. It would take three weeks at least, she decided.

Jack argued quite sanely, in the face of existing events, that it was absurd to wait and that Susie courted trouble by doing so. "Why not cut the church and have done with it?" he questioned relevantly. "There's no knowing what mischief that mother of yours will be up to, and there's Saunderson, too—come, Susie," he urged, "look at things straight and never mind the church."

But the girl only shook her head and clung more closely to her lover. "Dear," she whispered, "let me have my way in this. I have set my heart on it and I don't care a straw for mother now, or for Saunderson." She lifted her lips to his as she spoke and the starlight showed them soft and carmine.

What could a man do in such a case? What would most men do? He might kiss the lips and say nothing, or, if he were wise and old and had experience, possibly he might argue, if only to prolong a situation so beautifully stirring; but Jack was unversed in the wiles of experience. He felt the girl clinging to him, heard that she begged, saw her eyes soft and

pleading and answered after his kind, "God love you, lass; I'd do more than that to see you happy."

An hour passed; they still sat amidst the trees, arms twined and at rest. A woman crept from the path out there in the dusk and stood watching—they made no sign of having seen her. Twigs snapped beneath her feet as she moved away—they did not hear.

The river at rest. Nature at rest. Night with its veil drawn screening youth from the world of men; night with a soft south wind to fan faces foolishly heated; then a bell on the training ship giving out four strokes and Susie on her feet.

"Four bells, Jack—what's that?"

And the man still reclining. "Ten o'clock, lass—why?"

"Oh, my dear, my dear, I ought to be at home."

"Soon," came the deeper voice as Jack stood now and drew her to him, "soon you'll have no home but mine. God love you! Yes, I know. It's my fault. Come."

CHAPTER V

And Plays Her Hand

A KISS for watchfulness, a kiss for guardianship, a kiss for remembrance—these were the seals set by Elliott on the girl's sweet face as he left her at the park gates. She was late—what did it matter? She had Jack's love. There would be a scene—well, let it come. She could face it smiling and in silence at the thought of the kisses. Jack loved another? What nonsense. Had it not all been explained. Was he not even now on his way to the vicar to arrange for their wedding?

The lightness of Susie's step as she skipped up the street was proof of her serenity at this moment; but before she had traversed half the distance, there came a pause so sudden that it appeared she intended to return. Still she did not return. She halted, shrinking into the shadow of the wall.

There are some figures which it is quite impossible to mistake. In twilight, in dusk or dwarfed by distance, they stand out for the men they are. Saunderson was one of this type. Tall, strong, with a decided walk and alert pose, the man was recognisable at once—and he issued now from George Sutcliffe's cottage to stand a moment gazing down the street. Whether he saw her Susie never knew, but she decided at once that, if he came towards the park, she must meet him. She was not afraid and would not run away. She would meet him. As it happened, however, the big man did not come towards her but moved in the opposite direction—perhaps, as the girl

smilingly acknowledged, to the bar of the Southern Trader. Susie was aware of the attraction lying dormant within those walls, and at the moment the feeling uppermost in her mind was one of thankfulness.

The man's figure being presently hidden by a turn of the street, Susie resumed her way. She came to her home wondering what new plotting had brought Saunderson there at such an hour, and discovered with a little throb of anxiety that the windows were already shuttered for the night and the house in darkness.

The signs were ominous. Coupled with Saunderson's recent presence they suggested trouble; but Susie came to the steps and after some small indecision, knocked boldly for admittance. Some minutes passed in silence, then came the sound of shuffling feet, a bolt was drawn, and Mrs. Sutcliffe appeared in the doorway.

At the far end of the passage Susie discovered a lighted lamp standing on the kitchen table. Beside it a Bible, Mrs. Sutcliffe's Bible, open and placed ostentatiously in view. The girl knew by experience what this boded. She stepped within and attempted to pass. Mrs. Sutcliffe blocked the way, her face giving indications of the question which presently escaped her thin, harsh lips:

"Wheer hev you bin?"

"Out for a walk."

Mrs. Sutcliffe stood quite still. She lifted her eyes to the dim ceiling and said: "Haigh! 'Ow long, O Lawd, 'ow long!"

"You make home so pleasant for me," Susie explained, "that I am glad to be away."

She attempted to pass into the kitchen, but again Mrs. Sutcliffe barred the way.

"Stand back!" she cried, "an' tell me wheer you've bin, Miss Pert." Then, as Susie refused to reply, the voice fell once more into the dismal and canting tones so familiar in that household, "or," she said, "there's no need fer lies—fer went not my soul wiv thee?"

There was an ugly gleam in the woman's eyes, a suggestion of triumph, and Susie instantly decided that her mother had seen her, perhaps watched her in the Spinney. The suspicion became a certainty on examination, for Mrs. Sutcliffe's eyes gave her away. The meanness of the action set the girl's pulses tingling.

"Your soul!" she hazarded, "I don't believe you have one. It's much more likely you've been spying."

The retort went home, and Mrs. Sutcliffe acknowledged it in a phrase. "A guilty consence," she said, "needs no ekuser."

"Which is the reason you can't look me in the face, I suppose?"

"Don't you give me any of your lip, me gell. If I was 'appening to pass the Spinney an' 'eard voices as turned me aside, it isn't fer you to say I were spyin'. Wot were you doin' in the Spinney?"

"I was talking to Jack."

This time an opening appeared and Mrs. Sutcliffe speedily availed herself of the opportunity. "Decent gells don't lie in young men's arms," she gave out with a dreary sneer.

"I am engaged to Jack. He is my promised husband—he has a right to——"

"Any one seein' you would a said 'ee were your 'usband," Mrs. Sutcliffe interrupted with biting emphasis, "only that p'raps 'ee were a trifle too fond."

Susie turned to hide her face. A wave of anger and mortification swept over her. "Oh, Jack, Jack!" she cried. Then

with a swift acknowledgment of her hurts: "Let me pass, woman. I wish to go to my room."

"Your room?" came the reply, satirically twisted. "Lawd! wheer's that?" and again with an accent which admitted of no guesswork. "Your room? You hev no room. There's no room 'ere for the likes of you."

The words were very distinct, the inference abominable, yet Susie scarcely comprehended, even now, the length to which this woman was prepared to go. She stood as one too much astonished for speech, and the other expatiated on the fact, hammering it home.

"You don't seem to understand," said Mrs. Sutcliffe, her arms thrust out in explanation. "I say you 'av no room. I say my house shall not be contiminated by your goin's on any longer. I say that unless you like to marry Saunderson I'll——"

"Oh, you dare not—you dare not!" Susie cried out. "You know it isn't true. Let me pass!"

"I know wot I saw, me gell," came grimly from the thin lips.

"It is not true," Susie wailed. "I say it is not true."

"The face of the Lawd is against all them as do evil. I will 'av no pawt in thy wickedness, saith the Lawd."

"If you believe that you will let me pass. I swear I have done no wickedness. Jack is——"

"Keep 'is name out of it."

"We are to be married—it is impossible."

"Married are you—well, now you look at wot I say, fer it's the lawst word—see?" She ticked off the points on her fingers; speaking acidly: "You'll give me your promise not to see that man again. You'll give me your promise to throw 'im over. You'll give me your promise to marry Jim Saunderson, an'," she added with grim accentuation, "if you don't, out you go."

Susie was pale now, pale with strangely drawn eyes. Her brain took in what was expected of her in so far that she understood what was said; but beyond that it refused to register. It seemed impossible to believe that the woman meant precisely what she said. It seemed impossible that any one would carry out threats so irrational and in the face of such flimsy evidence. To turn a young girl from her home at any hour and for any reason is monstrous, but at night it is criminal. Susie refused to believe in this nightmare. She had come home prepared for trouble, but scarcely for this; she had come home perhaps a little defiant, but she had not dreamed of this. She had spoken hastily. It was a mistake. She turned to her stepmother to acknowledge it. "I am sorry I have angered you and kept you up," she said. "I did not mean to. I forgot the time. Jack has had some luck and we had to discuss——"

"I'm waitin' fer that promise I spoke of," the cold voice interrupted. "Give it, or——"

"I can't give it. Could you give it if you were in my place?"

"That's not the point."

"I know it, I know it, and I know too that it is impossible to persuade you that I have done no wrong. But," Susie went on determined to give no further loophole, "but for dad's sake, don't let this go any farther. Let it drop. It would kill him to hear such talk—and it isn't true. I swear it. Look! I will go on my knees to you. I will beg you to let me stay if you wish. Oh, for God's sake listen—I will do anything—anything but marry Saunderson. I can't marry him. Mother! I will do anything except that. Only let me stay. Don't turn me into the streets!"

Susie fell on her knees at the word but Mrs. Sutcliffe shook

her off. "Don't call me mother!" she cried harshly, "or go on yer knees to me. Kneel to yer Maker. Gawd knows I wouldn't be yer mother for all the gold in the Indies. Keep yer 'ands off!"

Susie rose like one suddenly lashed on the face. She was stung now beyond endurance. She would beg no longer. She would fight, there was no other way left. A new scorn rang in her voice when next she spoke.

"If you had been my mother," she said swiftly, "I should have died when I was a baby. Children can't live on texts. Let me pass."

"Stand back!" Mrs. Sutcliffe enjoined, her voice ringing angrily in the narrow passage. "I won't be insulted in my own 'ouse."

"Your house! My father's house you mean. Oh, if he were at home—if he were at home!"

"Father!" Mrs. Sutcliffe shrieked. "Aye, if I'd 'ad my way wi' you, me gell, it isn't the Spinney you'd a bin in, but the Lawd's 'Ouse, if I'd 'ad to chain you to me wrist to drag you there."

She shook her fist menacingly in Susie's face, but the girl was accustomed to vagaries of this kind and did not flinch. She faced her enemy with pale cheeks and gave back blow for blow.

"A lot of good your chapel has done you!" she countered swiftly. "Where is your charity or love or forgiveness? Where are any of the things you hear of from squawking ministers at your chapel?"

"Hold your tongue, miss."

"I will do nothing of the kind. You are so fond of your godliness. You snivel and whine all day of it. You are for ever quoting texts about love and forgiveness, but because I

am late you threaten to turn me into the streets. You think you are just. You pride yourself on your judgment, but I tell you your chapel creeping has made you a hypocrite—nothing less."

"Chapel creeping?"

Mrs. Sutcliffe was strangely quiet now. Her lips were drawn in a thin, bloodless line. "Have you done, miss?" she asked.

"I have not. You aren't used to hearing the truth, so for once you shall have it.

"You go about with a sniff of contempt for your less fortunate sisters. You ferret out lies about them and repeat them in your chapel doors. If a girl goes wrong it is you and your friends who have driven her to it. When she walks into the river you hold your noses high and say, 'Thank Gawd I'm not as she is.' Oh, you are very consistent in your godliness—but it is the men who fetch her out—the men who don't go to chapel.

"No, there can be nothing between us now, only enmity. You have hated me always, because I am father's child. Now I hate you and if I am to go into the streets you will have to put me there. Stand back—I will pass."

She paused breathless and strove to force her way in. But the woman was strong and energetic. Her eyes narrowed. She had forgotten her quotations, forgotten her husband, forgotten the cause of the controversy. She stood to "fight for the sanctity of her home," and for her own mastery therein. "Back yerself!" she shouted and in a moment Susie was caught and thrown against the wall with a stinging slap in the face. The girl reeled, fighting blindly. Her foot slipped. Then Mrs. Sutcliffe took her by the shoulders and hrust her out.

"Go!" she shouted in ungovernable anger. "Never you dawken these doors again. Go! Go to yer lover."

The door slammed. There was a noise of vicious bolting and barring, then silence fell once more on the old-world village street.

CHAPTER VI

Susie Revokes

LIFE is like a game of whist. To all of us when we come into the world cards are dealt and Nature stands aside to see us play them. Sometimes we play them well, sometimes we play them ill. Susie had scarcely made the best use of her hand and now she stood in the street at a time which roysterers from the Southern Trader and other hells consider their own.

The stars looked down upon her in the stillness awaiting the card she would play.

Never before had the village seemed so inquisitive; never before had the old home appeared so full of insidious laughter. The windows across the way were peopled with prying eyes, the lamps winked behind masks imperturbably grave of mien; the little alley down there by the garden sheltered countless peeping Toms.

Susie looked up at the forlorn house she had known hitherto as a certain refuge and saw that the passage was dark. The sounds of housewifely care filtered through the walls. Mrs. Sutcliffe was locking up, closing her Bible, and turning out the lights. Susie remembered that presently the stern creation who had stood so long in her mother's stead, would ascend the stairs, disrobe, and kneel—kneel to beseech God's care for the ensuing hours, God's direction for future works, God's approbation for past deeds; and the knowledge gave additional point to the anguish she endured. The irony of it! The

mockery! It stung the girl to action and she threw herself upon the door, beating piteously with her hands. But no soft voice nor forgiving word came in answer to her supplication. She moved to the window and strove to loosen the catch. She stooped and found a stone with which to batter it, and again stood still. For down the street came a guest of the Southern Trader, ribald and stumbling under the weight of the liquor he had consumed. He sang noisily with a tongue that hyphened his words:

"We won-go-'ome till marnen—
We-won-go-'ome till mar-ner-ing—
We-won-go-'ome, hic, till mar-ner-ing!
Before the br-cake-a-daysh."

Susie hastened to the porch, searching the narrow yard for sanctuary. She was still now and very pale. She decided that she must not be seen by this songster. With swift intuition she acknowledged that if he met her there would be further trouble. She had no desire for further trouble, especially of the sort that promised. Yet how was she to escape?

The man approached in stumbling solemnity. The pavement was too narrow to give him foot room. The road became part of the scheme developed to wreck him. He strutted there in the dim light, as destiny ordering events, and again broke into song, a ribald, hateful thing born of the cups from which he had been driven by a publican tardily acknowledging that even he had duties. It was "The Chaffinch" who faced Susie at this hour, a man with whom no woman in that village wantonly attempted a passage of arms.

To-morrow, if he espied the girl, all Abbeyville would be listening with bated breath to the history of his amazing conquest. To-morrow, if this thing chanced, she would be anathema—outcast; one over whom the village would wag its head suggesting the unutterable.

Susie decided that she could not risk this new peril, and with the decision came action. She opened the gate and in a moment was flying like a shadow towards the park. The man saw her and commanded her to wait. Endearing adjectives took the place of that ribald song, he clamoured for her company and the noise he made gave a new incentive to flight. Susie turned up the lane leading from the river, where an hour ago she had parted with Jack. She held a hand now in which there were no trumps, in which there were no kings, no aces, no queens—only the rank and file brandishing red and black pips. And the stars looked down upon her awaiting the card she would play.

Slave Alley is the name of the avenue through which Susie passed on this night, and in the years of Britain's travail the Romans drove their captives down its length to the galleys lying out there where the *Bluebell* hugged the mooring posts, waiting to go on the ways. Above them towered the hill which gave them shelter, Galley Hill, the place where perchance Susie might obtain succour and towards which at the moment she moved.

Midway to the top of the slope she paused for breath. Not a sound marred the exquisite night. The solitary lamp at the end of the road burned without flickering. The leaves drew patterns in the white at her feet. It was lonely, still. All the quiet country folk were in bed and only such stray revellers as the man down there were abroad.

A noise assailed the girl's ears. She leaned forward and discovered the form of her pursuer dark among the shadows.

Again she searched for a hiding place, a place wherein she could pause and gain time for thought; but the walls ran straight and high, harbourless on either hand. Susie waited no longer. She hastened to the high road which crossed at

right angles the way she had come. Five or six miles in either direction would see her in the streets of a town—and, as a matter of detail, it would be perhaps one o'clock. On the left, two miles from where she paused, the vicarage lights flickered advising her the family were not yet in bed, but to reach it she must run the gauntlet of Galley Hill. Before her, winding across the fields, was the villager's track to Northdean, a little hamlet nestling on the edge of Shorncombe woods.

Jack lived at Northdean. In less than ten minutes she could be at his side and safety would take the place of danger, rest of unrest, love of hatefulness. She sank down on the grass at the roadside struggling to think coherently.

The tall trees threw their shadows across her, whispering in the breeze which claimed the hilltop. At the foot of the Alley she could see the river dotted with lights and quivering reflections, here a red gleam, there a green, here a cluster all white, there a space unlighted.

It was Jack's river, her river—the river she had watched and loved from childhood. Childhood? Ah, that was gone. Gone with the loss of her home. Gone with the stigma which would now so inevitably fall upon her. In the eyes of that narrow village world she would be degraded, a hussy steeped in sin. To-morrow her stepmother's tongue would have magnified her foolishness beyond palliation; to-morrow the idiot village would roll its head at her, tongue in cheek; to-morrow, if she did not act now, she would find herself cut off from hope. There was but one solution to it all. She must go to Jack. She had no home. She must ask Jack to give her one. They must be married at once. She must give up that notion she had desired and face the registry office—otherwise she would be outcast; a person at which dreary Christians

sneer; an object for the pity of missions and societies which reclaim.

She must go to Jack. If she did not go to Jack, she told herself that all these things must come to her. She was driven —driven by some power over which she had no control. Oh! if her father had been at home, or she had been with him— useless, worse than useless, for then this had not happened. The futility of the "might have beens" struck her and she writhed. Her thoughts became a burden. The solitude unbearable.

She rose at once and keeping in the shadow of the hedgerow fled swiftly on till the cottages stood in view. A flush of shame crimsoned her brow here, but the night was kind, it was nearly twelve o'clock and all the houses dark.

Jack's window alone showed a faint light. Susie hastened towards it. She unlatched the gate and crossed the strip of garden. Every nerve in her body thrilled now. Her face burned. Her eyes took a strange, soft look. She peeped in unheard.

Jack reclined in an easy chair at the back of the room asleep. The paper he had been reading lay on the floor, his pipe had gone out. He rested there in quiet content, at peace with all the world and ignorant of the anguish she endured.

She whispered his name. He slept unmindful. The window was open, the sill low—in another moment Susie had entered the room and fallen on her knees at his feet!

"Jack! Jack! Oh, my dear, my dear!"

She buried her face on his breast, fondling him like a repentant child. And springing suddenly from dreamland he caught her to him whispering:

"Susie—is that Susie?"

"Who else could it be, dear?"

Then the incongruity of the situation and her quaint reply struck her and she leaned in his arms sobbing pitifully.

The girl's nerves were all unstrung. She verged at that instant on the hysteria of all excitable natures. The room was stifling, it seemed that she stood in danger of suffocation. She sprang to her feet as Jack moved away to find water, and fled suddenly into the garden.

Elliott managed to overtake her as she essayed a passage through a gap in the hedge across the way. He took her in his arms and moved firmly towards the house. But she struggled for freedom.

"Not there, not in there," she begged between laughter and tears. "Stay out. It is cooler—and I—I must tell you."

He waited in silence what came, his strong grip and quiet manner soothing her. She became calm under his influence.

"What is it, Susie?" he questioned at length. "Tell me what has gone wrong."

She looked up smiling, "Nothing, Jack."

"Nothing, Susie?"

"I—I have no home, dear—that's all."

"No home?" he questioned uncomprehending.

"No home, Jack."

"You mean they have turned you out?" he adventured, feeling his way through a maze of guesses.

"Mother has."

"Good God! What for?"

The girl broke into a passion of tears. "Because she hates me," she wailed, "and because I was late. But principally because I refused to give you up and marry Saunderson."

"Surely you can't mean it," he objected. Then raging up and down before her: "My God! come with me, lass, and I'll see you safe if I stave the walls in. Threw you out, did she?

Your mother who makes such a song of her religion. Come, I'll take you home. There's nothing else for it."

But Susie drew back, shaking her head. "I can't live there," she returned. "I am a coward perhaps, but I can't face her again."

"Then what is to be done?"

Susie reached up and put her arms about his neck—

"I must stay with you, Jack—and——"

"Here?" he questioned, mindful of the prying eyes which would wake with daylight.

"Anywhere, anywhere—and to-morrow you must take me to aunt's at Swinfleet."

He held her close, watching the leaping colour. One hand discovered a way to smooth the soft cheek resting so near his own. Their eyes met, a restful look in hers, a look which shook him in spite of the anger still smouldering. "No," he answered, "it can't be here, Susie; but I know a place not far off—where I can take you, where I can leave you if you wish it—but——"

"Is that necessary?" she interposed still watching him.

He caught her to him in a fierce tumult of delight. "No, it's not necessary. You are mine and I will guard you. You are mine—mine. God love you, sweet, I'll never let you go."

And the stars looked down upon them as they moved away. They seemed to smile at the cards which had been played.

CHAPTER VII

The Inquisitor

AGAIN it was night and again these two passed out into coolness to find that sanctuary of which Susie had spoken. Swinfleet lay some miles distant and the farm was farther still, but they were going thither strong in the knowledge that Mrs. Surridge would give them welcome.

It had been necessary to delay till darkness had set in for reasons mainly concerned with Elliott's calling. He had been out all day thrashing the river, towing barges and berthing a ship. Also he had been to the registrar to discover how soon it was possible to "get tied up," and that official had informed him of the necessary notice. To-morrow was Sunday and on Monday and the two following days he would be down river.

Susie smiled when these delays were presented for her inspection. She had no opinion of marriages solemnised in an office and gave the matter scant attention.

"The banns are up, Jack," she decided off hand. "We shall be asked to-morrow. A day or two will make no difference. I am content—aren't you?"

"Content!" He took her in his arms and the smile he discovered seemed to suggest that she found the answer complete.

Some little distance outside Northdean the country is an undulating plain, tilled, divided, and without roads. It is a vast garden in fact, planted with strawberries, currants, gooseberries, and hops. Beyond lies Shorncombe wood, a wide expanse covered with trees, bushes, gorse, and bracken. A

few paths cross it, and amidst the trees, where the farm carts have furrowed a passage, these are easily followed, but where the foliage is denser the track degenerates into a mere beaten footway, difficult to find even in daylight. At night the risk is great, of course, for a stranger, but Elliott knew the landmarks, knew them for part of that great playground of his in which he had learned to love.

The village clock was striking ten when they passed the pond near the entrance and came into the woods. Outside a cool breeze had swept across the fields, but within the sheltering trees no wind stirred and the air was warm and humid.

Still the lovers moved on, sometimes in quiet, sometimes whispering of the life which was so soon to begin, which, in point of fact, had begun; but always their arms were intertwined and their heads bent to search for the pitfalls with which the way abounded. They reached at length a gentle slope which led them to a small clearing near the centre of the wood; a space peopled only by the oaks, where many tracks meet, diverge and wind off amidst the farther undergrowth.

Is was lighter here. The trees stood well apart and the stars looked down upon them. And as the two paused there the sound of approaching footsteps fell on their ears; and on looking up they perceived a figure moving quickly to intercept them.

A woman, tall, slight, and dressed wholly in black, came from the shadows holding up one hand. Her face showed white against the trees; her hair, too, seemed white; but as she drew near they saw that it was like straw in colour. She halted close beside them with an expression of thankfulness which was almost painful in its intensity.

"Thank God!" she cried. "Thank God for this. I feared I was doomed to wander all night. It is dark and cold

here, and I am very weary. Can you direct me to Abbeyville?"

Jack regarded her advent with some asperity. He resented, not unnaturally, the intrusion of a second care. "To Abbeyville?" he questioned. "It isn't easy. It's four miles from here and the path runs anyhow."

"But you can point it out—surely you can do that."

"Do you know the woods?"

"I see them to-night for the first time."

"Then it's impossible," said Jack.

"Don't say that. For God's sake don't say that."

"What else can I say? There's no road, only a track, a dozen tracks. Why you might wander all night without getting to Abbeyville."

"And I have been walking now since dusk. At six o'clock I reached the little village over there, Swinfleet they call it, and had a cup of tea. Then I started to cross the woods, but a dreadful man sprang out of the trees and in avoiding him I lost my way. He was naked. Oh! it was horrible."

"Some poor devil escaped from the asylum," Elliott suggested. "Well, this beats all. Here are we——"

Susie crept to his side, interrupting him with a pathetic gesture; "We must help her, dear. We can't leave her here alone."

"Short of going back a couple of miles there's no way of doing it, lass."

"Then we must go back. I am not a bit tired."

"If you could and there really is no other way, it would be a kindness," the woman acknowledged.

"To you, yes; but to——"

"Nonsense, Jack. I can manage it easily."

The woman came close beside them and taking Susie's hand

said: "I don't know who your are, nor do I ask. But you have a sweet face and I thank you from my heart. And I pray that when you have reached my age you may still be beautiful enough to hold your husband's love. What am I talking of! You are my Good Samaritans. I must not delay. Come."

She spoke with so much ease and appeared so weary, downcast, and full of trouble, that Jack relented and consented to the proposal. They turned at once to retrace their steps and in a few minutes had again entered the solitude from which they had only just emerged. But they walked in silence until Susie, finding it irksome, ventured a question.

"Do you know Abbeyville?" she asked.

"I have never seen it."

"A strange time to choose for a first visit," Elliott laughed.

"Fate makes no choice of time."

"Fate?"

"Love, if you like it better."

The tone sufficed. The trio moved again in silence.

Down the path, over the hill, through a dense mass of foliage where they were compelled to stoop and hold back the boughs to force a passage; round bends and turns until at length they stood on the verge of the wood and the remaining distance could be indicated. Here Elliott paused to give the necessary instructions and the woman held out her hand.

"I spoke brusquely just now," she said. "I hope you will overlook it. I have my reasons. A woman turns to her sex for aid. How seldom her sex aids her you will learn with years. But you have been good to me and I wish I could see you again. Still, that is impossible; no, I ask no questions, nor do I give any confidences. Good bye—and you, dear,God bless you for your sympathy."

She marched off without waiting for any reply, her tall, slim form swaying against the starlight. It appeared, at that moment, that she neither cared for nor heeded the fact of the additional tramp she had caused. Unquestionably she had been brusque.

"Who can she be, Jack?" Susie questioned as they moved forward.

"God knows. Perhaps another lunatic—the woods often hold them."

"She didn't speak like one."

"No, but she's queer for all that—and she has given us a tidy jaunt for nothing."

"Still, I am glad we helped her," Susie decided.

"It adds another four miles to your walk, lass—four and six is ten. It's too much."

"For you, dear?"

"No," he laughed; "for you."

"Then don't think of it, for you and I are one."

Again they entered the woods, passed the clearing and came to the outskirts; but before they reached it, long before they drew near it, Susie began to lag. The way was so difficult, the path rugged, dark, and full of pitfalls. When at length they emerged upon the road the moon was high, the night calm, and Susie too weary for words.

They came to a little dell sheltered from the breeze and Susie paused to look upon it. "It is like our own dear Spinney," she whispered, "and oh! I am so tired."

"Then rest a while, Sweet. God knows it can make no difference now." He half carried her across the road and brought her to the bank.

"And even if it did, Jack, I think I must," she begged.

He stooped to clear a space, then spread his coat upon the

leaves, and she nestled down to rest. "I am so tired," she smiled, "I think I could sleep for ever."

From far over the hills there came the shriek of an early train, the birds awoke, looked out, and saw the day was come. They preened their wings, fluttering busily in the soft warm air. The land was silent. The lights in the distant village grew dim, paled, and died. Smoke rose straight from a score of chimneys. Swinfleet was awake, and out there, beyond, Mrs. Surridge bustled about the farm questioning at intervals what had happened that Susie was not with her.

Part II

The Men and Their Master

CHAPTER I

The Master

RIVERTON is one of London's outposts. By no stretch of imagination could one call it beautiful or picturesque in itself, and yet it has a beauty such as may be found in few environments. To discover it one must accept the river as part of it; to see it at its best one must choose the hour.

At sunrise or at sunset, when the Thames rolls swiftly past the jutting piers and anchored shipping, when the red sails of tacking barges are turning mauve or purple; when the giant liners lying out there in mid-stream, carry a tinge of flame about their rails and blue on their sides; when the hulks and buoys and loading colliers are all bathed alike in that heaven-flung radiance, and the houses climbing tier above tier ashore seem to be palaces fashioned in the kingdom of the skies—then Riverton is beautiful; beautiful in that expressively sorrowful way which is one of England's greatest charms.

But if you take the streets and examine them, if you count the number of gin palaces flaunting brass and rank humanity to the skies; if you look at the shops which are dowdy, the slums which are abominable, or the government which is be-

yond criticism, then you find a town of the old style made modern without improvement; a town completely and overwhelmingly crushed by its gigantic neighbour and you marvel at the opportunities which it seems are lost for all time.

Still, Riverton has docks, piers, forts, sea-walls and a garrison. The troops sometimes visit the churches, bugles are to be heard and the red or khaki uniform is in evidence always on the footways. It may be accepted, therefore, that Riverton is a place of some importance in this fair land of ours.

Now Wakeley Dunscombe, the owner of the *Bluebell*, lived in Riverton and grew fat on the provender procurable on the broad bosom of father Thames. He was one of the men who would have grown fat in any business community. He had a natural facility for making money grow. His friends spoke of him with enthusiasm. They said that he was "an indefatigable business man," by which term, if one analyses it, they probably wished it to be understood that he was a money-spinner. To get money is, of course, legitimate either in Riverton or elsewhere—the thing which matters is the means employed, and Dunscombe's means were very mean.

Prosperity shone in every wrinkle in this man's face. It shouted from his diamond bedizened fingers and grew positively offensive with the ponderous chain and seals dangling ostentatiously across his waistcoat. But the bank people attended his wants without question and the clergy called.

Among his men Dunscombe had the name of being the hardest master on all the river side. No scheme was too low, too mean or too sordid for him to finger, provided he saw his way to clear a profit. His skippers were selected with but few exceptions from the riff-raff of Thames watermen, and he ground them in the mill of competition without remorse. He looked upon his "hands" as puppets out of which to fashion

wealth as speedily and economically as possible. He ruled them with a rod of iron, turned them adrift on the smallest provocation, and had earned the promised vengeance of not a few—a state of affairs in which he rather gloried.

He was an assertive, entirely self-made man of slight education and boundless energy. A man of small stature, with quick eyes and a colouring which betokened the admixture of Welsh blood on the part of some not distant ancestor. But of this latter Dunscombe was unaware. Indeed he would have denied the imputation with scorn, for he prided himself particularly on the lack of a genealogical tree, as though the fact that he had descended from someone and had inherited traits as well as induced them, reflected in some obscure fashion on his individual success and made it less his own.

His house was characteristic of the man. He designed it, contracted for it, and built it. No sufficiently enterprising builder could be found to undertake the work—on Dunscombe's terms. It was large, showy, and quite original. On the ground floor it blossomed solemnly as a Queen Anne; higher, it sprouted Gothic excrescences and embrasures; still higher, red brick battlements flourished and the necessity for something in the middle was met by a lighthouse. From the windows of this structure Dunscombe commanded a view of the neighbouring chimney-pots, together with that angle of the river dominated by his wharf. From this eminence, too, he surveyed the swarming hive of men, and pondered on the means of extracting further profits.

Everything about the house proclaimed the man. Everything spoke of the theodolite and rule. The windows wore symmetrical bibs and tuckers, tied individually round the waist with crisp pink ribbons, as though they were children expecting company. The doors flashed shiny glances at their duller

neighbours across the way; and the resplendent brass-work winked like a yacht's fittings.

But it was the garden that Dunscombe especially loved to trim and square and rule out of all decency. Here the angles, triangles, and octagons were positively indecorous. Nothing could well be bolder than the iron border around the beds, except, perhaps, the filagree fence that hemmed the lawn. Nothing could well be more shameless than the box-tree stork that sat in a garden nest looking for chicks which never came; except, perhaps, the puffy rotundities of that cherub, dancing wantonly beside plaster lions grinning ferocity on either side the steps.

The diamond-shaped beds were filled with foliage plants arranged in a diamond-shaped pattern. The trees were shaved as though their master were a barber and exhibited them as his sign. In the centre of an iron-bound fountain, a shivering Venus stood waiting for the water which never flowed. The plants were all of one height and one circumference. Individual excrescences were promptly nipped in the bud; it appeared as though the trees and shrubs had, by long training, become imbued with a sense of their own insignificance, and had agreed to suffer effacement before the preponderating egoism of the Master.

Adjoining the house and overlooking the garden where Venus shivered eternally, was a small study which Dunscombe used often as an office; for, even his home was not sacred from the business of money-getting. Here he frequently saw those "Captains" of his, whose arrival he had witnessed from the lighthouse, after the office was closed. And it was here that Dunscombe sat one evening, toasting his toes over a glowing fire, and pondering jovially on the triumph of "individual talent" when set in opposition to the narrower possibilities of more honourable firms.

A letter had just reached him from the owners of the steamer which had collided with the *Bluebell*. It was a comforting letter, containing the offer of a compromise, forwarded through his solicitor. An offer worth accepting, for Dunscombe knew that fifty pounds judiciously spent, would make the *Bluebell* every whit as seaworthy as she had been before—which, perhaps, is not very high praise.

The compromise was for three times that amount, and no law worries. Dunscombe's mouth watered as he sat there thinking his thoughts in silence, and a smile of infinite complacency lingered on his face. Once more, to use his own phrase, had he crept to windward and won. Once more the *Bluebell* would shine and be the pride and envy of all the fleet at no expense to himself. True, a man had been drowned in the collision, and a broken-hearted woman with four hungry brats had wept loudly in the hall; but that had been the skipper's fault, not his: an accident in the game, which the hands must learn to take—with their pay. On the whole, the affair might have been worse; and if Saunderson had been less of a fool, he might have stayed on—but . . . The man's jaws snapped like a gin, and he had mentally decided to write to his solicitors bidding them accept, when a maid entered to announce one of the men.

"Who is it?"

"Captain Saunderson, sir."

"Saunderson, eh? Show him in."

Now Saunderson had been much in Dunscombe's thoughts for some time past. In addition to the matter of reckless navigation it had come to the master's ears that this zealous servitor of his was promulgating a strike among the hands; that he was the leading spirit in the strike now in progress at a certain cement factory, close at hand, which had caused him considerable loss.

To touch Dunscombe thus was identical with flicking a horse on a raw. It made him kick out with curious indiscretion, an effect probably of the lack of educative self-control.

The man moved heavily into the room and stood twisting his cap in his hands. There was a cut across his forehead, and the back of his head was bound with strips of plaster. He was not pretty to look at, and Dunscombe eyed him sharply.

"Well, Saunderson, what's come to you?" he cried. "Been fighting?"

"No, sir. It's in yon huffle I got it. There's a bad sea on, an' her gear's all to Jiminy; it's likely a block swingin' loose cut me a snick."

"Oh."

There was a peculiar inflection in Dunscombe's voice. He knew from long experience with what diffidence a Thames skipper speaks the truth, and took this opportunity of showing it. Saunderson squirmed where he stood. "Sir," he cried hotly; "them as say otherwise, lies. I'm standin' on the tug's deck; we are close under her bows an' the derelict's jumpin' crewl. What hit me I don't know; but it's somethin' flyin' loose."

"I thought there was a difficulty about getting very near?" said Dunscombe quietly.

Saunderson stared; the pulse in his forehead throbbed ominously. "It's a lie, Guv'nor!" he shouted.

"Silence, man; don't rave at me."

"It ain't easy to keep quiet when lies are slung at you," said Saunderson more soberly; "and, if every one had his doo," he continued with the intention of dispelling the bad impression he had made, "there's no two ways about it, the *Stormy Petrel* would get a change of masters."

"How do you mean?"

"It might pay you to shift skippers, Guv'nor—that's my meaning."

"Speak out, man; don't hint at things. If you have anything against Elliott, let me hear it."

Saunderson snapped his fingers with an affectation of indifference. "For that matter," he said, "I've nothing against Jack Elliott—he's as good a man as here or there another. But, he's got no principle—that's what I look at. A man that has no principle ain't any sort of man. What would you say to a chap that did a 'little bit on his own,' when he's bound to give account for all he earns? It ain't fair doos, sir. It's possible to do a good bit on your own, if you do it judicious."

"I suppose it is," said Dunscombe quietly; "most masters have to put up with robbery in one form or another."

"Aye, sir; maybe that's true. But when there's honest hands why keep dishonest? It's no sort of encouragement for the honest sort—now, is it? Tell me, sir, when did the towing of the *Tantalus*, Captain George Sutcliffe, come into your accounts? If you can tell me that I've done. Say I know nothing about it, an' you won't be far out."

Dunscombe looked up at the sound of this man's accusation, but he had no intention of bandying unnecessary words.

"How long ago?" he questioned.

"Ten days last Friday."

"Where?"

"Off the Jenkin."

"How do you know?"

"I'm coming through the Swatch wiv the *Deerstalker* and see it."

Dunscombe turned quietly to his desk. "I remember," he said, "I have an account of it."

Saunderson's air of certitude deserted him; he was completely

thrown off his guard. "Then Jack Elliott's a liar," he articulated. "Why he told the old man there would be no charge. Said he'd take five shillin's to settle the job. I heard him."

"I know nothing of that."

The two men remained in silence for some minutes, Saunderson uncomfortably twirling his cap, Dunscombe leaning back in his chair and eyeing him with a shrewd stare.

"Well," he remarked at length, "is that all you have against Elliott?"

"Most masters would think it enough."

"That is nothing to me."

The man was nonplussed. He did not like Dunscombe's quiet manner. It would have been more comfortable to hear him swear. There was something behind all this that he could not fathom, for Dunscombe, as a rule, was not chary about receiving information. Besides, Saunderson was conscious that in his hatred of Elliott, he had allowed his tongue to run away with him; the incident had grown in the telling.

"If that is all you have to say we may as well come back to business." Dunscombe's voice fell sharply on the man's ears as he leaned forward, searching for a paper. "For instance," he continued suavely, "what about this collision of yours. '*Caspian* v. *Bluebell*,' " he quoted from a document he held.

"What about it, sir?"

"I am not satisfied with your statements on the subject. How is it that you were not on deck yourself?"

"Sir, I've just gone below for a wash. A man can't always be on deck."

"You brought up at Thames Haven: what were you doing at the Golden Crown all the flood before you came up?"

"I went ashore to get some tommy. We're clean out of grub

an' when I come back the boat's got a hole knocked in her. What can I do? I must mend her so as she'll swim."

"Is that a true bill, Saunderson?"

The man had been drinking and again showed signs of it. "Lumme!" he blurted in desperation, "if it ain't the truth it's a lie. How'll that do?"

"It is a lie."

"All right; say it's a lie. What then, Mr. Dunscombe?"

"You were drunk, my lad."

"I was no more drunk," he shouted in blustering consternation at being confronted with the truth, "than you are, Guv'-nor."

"Silence, man."

"Lumme! I won't be silent. Who told you that? Where did you get it from? Why," he continued with one of those accessions of rage to which he was given, "from Elliott. That's where you got it."

"I have not seen Elliott," Dunscombe returned with hardened accent.

"Lie!" cried the other. "You want to shield Jack Elliott. You listen to him; you won't listen to me. By Gawd! I'll be even wiv the pair of you yet. S'elp me, if I'm not even wiv you, may I drop down dead—rotten——"

He plucked fiercely at his neckerchief and would have continued, but speech was denied him. In an access of ungovernable rage he only stuttered inaudibly.

Dunscombe rose to his feet and stood confronting him. "Silence!" he shouted. "How dare you. Get out of my house. I will have nothing further to do with you."

They stood some minutes glaring angrily at each other; then the stern, unbending attitude of the master, and the inborn habit of obedience, slovenly and ill-learned as it was, came

to Dunscombe's aid. The man turned slowly to open the door.

"I'm discharged?" he questioned in a smaller voice.

"Yes."

"Right. Then I'll have to look for another bloke, an' there's an end."

He walked from the room, but almost immediately returned. "May I look to you, sir, for a character?" he questioned.

"What sort of character can I give you?" Dunscombe sneered; "I hereby certify that James Saunderson has been captain of the schooner *Bluebell* for eighteen months, and lost her in a fit of drunkenness—something of that sort, eh?"

Saunderson stood twirling his cap in sullen apathy, and his master resumed:

"That I know that James Saunderson is a leading member of the Union, and upholds the rights of the workers against the masters. I might add that, too, eh, Captain?"

"An' haven't the men some rights?" cried Saunderson, his anger leaping anew. "Are we to sit still an' rot, while you trundle around in the carriage our work has got you?"

"You, individually, may starve and be damned. With the others I have nothing to do."

Saunderson drew breath quickly. He stood there, gazing round the room and moving his neck as though he found his collar stifled him. "And that's all you'll do for me?" he questioned.

"I have nothing further to say. Leave my house."

"Right."

He advanced to the door, opened it, and turned about. "Right, Guv'nor," he reiterated, speaking with slow emphasis, "but there's two parties in every raffle—it's all likely you'll find there's two in this."

He moved from the room and found his way into the street. He felt the need of air. It seemed to him, at that moment, that already the curse was beginning to work. He thrust out one hand questioning if this were so, but the darkness had no answer for him. It rilled in the streets as it had rilled out there where the trouble had arisen. Smoke twisted in the streets, fog had twisted on the river. That was the difference.

But to Dunscombe sitting before his comfortable fire the case presented no such illusion. He was in no way flustered by the scene from which he had emerged triumphant. He was accustomed to the silly ebullitions of wrath presented gratis by those "hands" he was compelled to discharge. He appreciated them at their full value. "A horse swerves when he is hit," he decided, "and the British workman swears. The difference is not worth consideration."

Still, seeing the man was now discharged and that he was obviously ripe for mischief, it became imperative that Dunscombe should at once accept the offered compromise; and to do this it was necessary to obtain a document from the wharf office and to see the foreman. When that was done he could give final instructions to his solicitor.

An hour later, therefore, Dunscombe rose from his desk and, wrapping warmly in the hall, called to his servants that he would be some time absent. With these words he closed the door and went out.

CHAPTER II

The Sea-wall

A FOGGY night, the streets greasy, the air thick and torpid; humanity owning homes hastening thither; humanity lacking anything in the similitude of that Elysium seeking their kennels, the gin palaces and the arches. In the arches carts are sometimes found, tail boards which shall form a roof, straw wherein mankind may lie and brood or breed as seems him best. It is one of the laws from which Authority tells us there is no escape. But in Riverton as elsewhere Authority is frequently found in the hands of men of Dunscombe-like proclivities—and, well perhaps it is immaterial what happens in the gutter.

A dull and foggy night lay over the town, and the town sweltered in it, sending heavenward a glare of yellow light as from the door of an open furnace. Clangs rose up in the stillness, the jar of wheels, and down there at the foot of the High Street the wail of steamers passing up Reach. Mankind too shuffled hither and thither in the gloom—Saunderson among them; Dunscombe, walking briskly riverward, and some malcontents, offshoots of the strike dragging its slow length over a neighbouring townlet, and with them several of Dunscombe's discharged hands.

A somewhat sottish company, on the whole, seeking on a sodden night some means of passing the hours, perhaps of losing them.

One leaning against the brass railing of the Scorpion moved

forward as Dunscombe came past but the master did not see him. He was busy with his plans, immersed in the cares of that business which had lifted him so high among the townspeople. The Scorpion's lamps were of the attractive order, bright and staring, as though mankind, like the moth, was to be cajoled into burning its wings. The light shone on this lounging man. His wings had been singed by its power. It shadowed the movements he made, brought out the fact that he was clothed in rags and that one arm dangled miserably as from a sling. But it was not slung. There were days when this had been the case—days of long ago, before the man had become the sottish lout revealed by that appalling glare.

Dunscombe passed on. Walking briskly he came to the meadow-land at the end of the road and entered the paths leading to the river. The singed man followed him, swearing. Dunscombe paused to stare at the water; the man who followed halted also.

The fog out there was cleaner than the fog in the town. It was whiter, but, for the shipping, more insidious. It was sufficiently thick to blanket the lights along shore, sufficiently clear to make the risk of continuing under steam not wholly impossible, and Dunscombe had pangs as he thought of his scattered fleet. He posed in the Riverton directory as a shipowner; but this sounding phrase meant simply that he owned a couple of coasting schooners, a brig, a tug or two, and half a score of barges. But as there is a head and a tail to all creeping things, so there is a head and a tail to the ship-owning fraternity. Dunscombe walked with the tail and the rattle he made suggested a kinship to the snake of that species.

He came to the sea-wall and faced the growing mist. He knew by the decreasing volume of sound that it was not yet thick enough to suspend navigation, for when this happens the

great river runs silently under its wintry cloak and the eddies swirling on the foreshore are the only tokens of its presence.

It was cold by the riverside. Those who have walked as Dunscombe walked know precisely the degree of discomfort produced by a river fog. Had he been a man of less persistence, of less energy, be would have returned. But this was not Dunscombe's way. There was money at the back of this walk. He had set himself the task of earning a good round sum from that long-suffering body of city men known as the underwriters, and he intended to lose no time in the process. To be an underwriter is synonymous in some people's eyes with being a Croesus. A Croesus is an individual who suffers from fatty degeneration of the moneybags and a knife is necessary to effect a cure—so with the underwriters. Dunscombe held the knife.

The river bank was slimy. To walk without gathering a sabot of clay was impossible—at the end of ten paces you shed a sabot and began again. Authority considered it an excellent means of keeping the Tommies in barracks, for no nursemaids with any pretensions would be seen dead on that clay. The man who followed Dunscombe considered it from a different standpoint.

On the one hand, then, there rolled a fog-bank slowly strangling navigation. On the other a white and steaming mist combined to hide the marshland. Dunscombe plodded on the clay perched high above the ditch which lay on his right. It was high tide and only a narrow margin of grass land intervened between the sea-wall and the river. He moved, therefore, with caution, as befits a man who intends to handle currency. He had often come here afoot in the dead of night. He had no fear, nor any very distinct impression that he was hated. He knew that he was not loved—as the river men express it—

but that formed no obstacle. Were there not police. The man had no imagination. His brain was occupied with the processes by which it is possible to make shipping pay in these days of competition, and nothing else was worthy of thought. As he came near the stile perched midway to the Garter Pier hotel an unusual sound struck his ear.

Dunscombe halted at once, his faculties alert to discover some new piece of idiocy on the part of his hands, for this was the anchoring ground of that fleet he ruled so parsimoniously. He told himself that a boat had been left to drive ashore and knock herself to pieces—perchance one of his boats. Devil take the careless loons! What thought have they for a master's property? In Dunscombe's eyes the only thing for which they care or look, is their "Saturday night"—all else is bagatelle.

Using his stick to guide him the man stepped down to make discoveries. He crossed the grass, avoiding the pools and bridged a rivulet which had its birth diurnally with the incident of high tide. Pish! He would be wet before he had done with this business—wet, and he desired to keep dry. No—it was not a boat; it was—what the devil was it?

Nothing—worse than nothing. A round and flabby horror; the carcass of a dead sheep or goat, distended, hairless, bobbing in the shallows—yet he could have sworn he heard a boat. Faugh! the thing stank. It was poison—rank. Why did these evidences of decay always drive ashore when there was the whole river to hide them? Dunscombe could not have said. The law governing the grounding of floating matter did not appeal to him except in the case of shipping, and then it only took the form of a question as to the punishment to be meeted to the author of the mishap. He commenced to climb the bank anew, then paused as again the sound crept out of the stillness.

He was right. He plumed himself on this fact. It wa

boat, a boat coming shoreward. He resumed his attitude of watchfulness and presently a cry rang out to satisfy him: "Ahoy there! Garter Pier ahoy!"

A bell struck near at hand was the response. Although nothing was visible Dunscombe knew from this that a boat was anchored only a few lengths distant. Again the cry assailed him: "Ahoy! Ahoy!" and the answer rolled in the fog.

"What ho, mate—hello!"

"Where away for Garter Pier? Up or down?"

"Down a tidy lump. Who's there?"

"Elliott."

"Jack Elliott?"

"Aye! This fog has put me out of my reckoning."

Dunscombe remained attentive. It was one of his modes of gleaning information, and frequently pregnant of results. The talk went on as the boat moved in. "Just up, I s'pose?"

"Aye; brought to off the wharf I reckoned, and want to catch the 8.15."

"You'll have to step it then. Land on the wall, mate; there's a tongue just inshore of me."

"Right. So long, skipper."

"So long, old son."

Dunscombe had gained but small information, but he had a word to say to Elliott and stepped back to give himself the pleasure of saying it with sufficient point. A minute later the boat's nose took the ground and as Elliott sprang ashore his master moved to confront him.

"This is not the sort of weather to leave your ship in, my lad," he threw out with a snarl.

The skipper paused midway to the bank and stared. "Who would have thought of seeing you, sir!" he remarked inconsequently.

"Evidently you would not. What are you doing?"

"Going home, sir."

"Call back your boat."

"What for?"

"To take you on board again."

"But I don't want to go aboard. I'm bound home."

"I suppose," said Dunscombe in his most provocative style, "I suppose you understand that you are refusing to obey my orders."

"Sir, I obey your orders. I obey them often when I'd like to do the other thing; but the tug's at anchor, lights hoisted, fires banked, the mate's in charge, and I am going home. The fog won't rise this side of noon to-morrow. Why should I stay? Excuse me, it's wet standing here."

With that he picked his way across the grass and climbed the sea-wall. Dunscombe followed.

"Now, sir, if you'll tell me what good it will do you me being on the tug," Elliott resumed, "why, although I'd promised Sue —that is I've made arrangements to be at home to-night, I'll listen to you."

This rather unwise speech angered Dunscombe and he turned round to give emphasis to the fact. "I am not going to argue, Elliott. I am not in the habit of arguing with my hands. I order you to go on board."

"Sir. I'm not a dog, though God knows I've served you faithfully. Suppose I refuse—what then?"

"You can take a week's notice."

Elliott hesitated. "That's it, Mr. Dunscombe; now we understand each other," he said at length.

"Hail your boat!" cried the master.

"No, sir. I'm not such a fool as to make those chaps turn back and lose their bearings in this thundering fog. If I do go

off it will be in a waterman's skiff. Why, what has gone wrong, sir? Don't I give you satisfaction?"

The skipper's voice took a new note. He was thinking of Susie and wondering how she would bear his home-coming if, on the eve of her marriage, he brought the news of his discharge. To quarrel with a man of Dunscombe's type was equivalent to a period of idleness, perhaps of starvation; for no skipper so discharged found it easy to regain command—at all events on the Thames.

Dunscombe watched him through half-closed eyes. "I believe," he returned with a snap, "that you might do better."

A suggestion flashed through Elliott's brain. "What is it, sir," he questioned, "hasn't the derelict job turned out trumps?"

"That is a big affair, my lad. We can leave it to look after itself. It is the little things, Elliott, the *little things* which give opportunity for peculation."

Dunscombe spoke meaningly, with an inflection that would have made a dead man squirm and Elliott acknowledged the fact in words that leaped hot to reply.

"Look here," he cried, "fair play's a jewel. Speak out straight—man to man. What have you got up against me?"

"Did you tow the *Tantalus* when she was on her last charter —quite lately?"

Elliott swore but quickly regained control. "I did give her a pluck," he acknowledged.

"Off the Jenkin?"

"That's it, sir."

"Where does it come in in the charges' sheet?"

"It doesn't come in."

"Why not?"

"Because there wasn't any towing done. Any little tosher* could have done it."

*Small tug-boat.

"Oh—how's that?"

"Well, it's like this. I'm lying on the tide waiting for a chance of a tow when Sutcliffe came sagging by. There wasn't enough wind to flutter the duff bag* at his masthead. Sutcliffe was driving on to the sands and I nosed him off to an anchorage. There wasn't any question of towing; there wasn't——"

"Yes, yes, I know all about it," Dunscombe broke in sharply. "It's the old story of damned, bare-faced robbery. You put your hand behind your back and take five shillings and arrange to say nothing about it."

Elliott faced him instantly, his face ablaze. "That's a lie!" he cried, "and the man that says it is a liar."

"Pish, man; don't bully me."

"It's a lie—by God, it's a lie."

"I know it for fact. Stand off, man, don't hustle me!"

"Hustle you—you damned worm! Stand off yourself. Take back those words or by the Lord and all His angels I'll choke them out of you—see?"

Elliott caught him by the throat and stood over him, shaking him savagely. Dunscombe was like a rat in the grip of a terrier, but he squirmed for freedom. "Let go!" he cried. "Heigh there—help! help!"

Elliott shook on. "You came down here to give me the sack; but you aren't the man to do it straight. You tell me I stole your money. You tell me I'm a liar when I'm speaking God's truth. You come sneaking and prowling about in places where you have no business—and now you've got something."

Dunscombe writhed in desperation. He had not looked for this. His habit of bully-ragging had got the better of his natural caution. A man may call another a liar, perhaps more than once, in the security of his office and from the arms of a

*Wind vane.

swivel chair upholstered in plush; but out in the open, facing the river, within sound of the steamer horns—scarcely. Yet he fought gamely for freedom, shouting his plaint to the night: "Let go! Let go! Hi, there! Help! Help!"

Elliott flung him off. "Right. Let go it is. Stand up fair and no nonsense. No man shall say I stole his money. Why, I would sooner have paid the crown myself than let poor Sutcliffe pay it. Stand out!"

The master gathered his forces and stood at bay: "It's a lie," he hissed, "and you know it. Mind, the matter won't end here. The courts shall decide it—you understand?"

His words suddenly died. A strange, choking cry broke from Elliott's lips. He leaped forward swinging his arm and Dunscombe fell on the clay he had marked with his feet—fell and remained there like a sack flung from the tail of a cart.

And then Elliott acted the fool.

When a man strikes down his master, the person who finds him that most necessary "Saturday night," he may fairly be accused of rashness; but when he leaves that master to the tenderness of a fog-bound night he acts the fool and perhaps something beside.

Necessarily Elliott did not admit this. Dunscombe had called him a liar and he had knocked him down—that being done the man's passion lapsed; the tension was over and he kneeled beside him to see how he fared. He breathed. There was a flickering of the drawn in nostrils, there was a bad cut over the eyes and the man bled; but he was only stunned and would recover. Too soon in all probability he would recover; then there would be trouble. Elliott would be delayed and unable perhaps to see Susie. Was there not even a chance of arrest? Had not Dunscombe threatened it in that paltry matter of the five shillings?

And if there was arrest he would not see Susie—Susie who waited his coming and was to go to church with him to-morrow to hear the banns read. Arrest—that was the danger.

The thing flashed before him in many guises. He had been branded a liar and a thief. For no fault he was to be discharged precisely as those others had been discharged. Dunscombe was no man. He deserved consideration from no one. Elliot breathed quickly at the memory of his wrongs and he rose from his knees and hastened up the sea-wall towards Riverton.

In his own vernacular, "all the fat was in the fire" and he must abide the result.

But the move was hazardous. Even more hazardous than that of Susie's upon which the stars had looked down and smiled.

And in the background was that singed figure from the door of the Scorpion—a man who carried one arm as though it were slung and on whose feet were clogs of the North country pattern —clogs heavy with clay.

CHAPTER III

Clack

THE fog had vanished, leaving the world to count the cost during some brief hours of sunshine. A dull, steamy day, lacking wind, with the sun sucking at the quivering marshland. Hours of this, then followed declining light, growing mist, the ghost of twilight and in natural sequence the earth lay banked once more in fog.

But early in the day, before noon in point of fact, Riverton was thrilled to its heart by a report. A rumour had arrived, carried no one knew whence or how, to the effect that a man had been found by the river embankment, under the sea-wall —a man, beaten, bruised, dead, and lying in the ditch outside the town.

A gloomy conclave approached the spot hazarding opinions and spouting vile tobacco:

"Terr'ble! terr'ble! Who can it be?"

A question this not easily answered, for the man's face was foully mauled and battered. It had lain, too, in that stagnant ditch some hours. Cries went up from lips biting hard on short black pipes: "Eigh! Shockin', shockin'. 'Oo's done it? Wot for? An' 'oo's the bloke?"

All pertinent questions given off by men peering at the thing lying there for men and boys to stare upon, given off in the dull, immovable fashion of persons accustomed to tragedy.

"'Oo's done it?" was speedily dismissed as an abstract problem requiring time for solution. "Wot for?" gained the

answer: "Not robbery, that's a moral," for were not watch and purse quite safe? "'Oo's the bloke?" was perhaps a trifle baffling on seeing the face. But the watch and some stray letters explained at once. A loafer with a dismal voice spelled out the name: Wakeley Dunscombe, Esquire.

Wakeley Dunscombe, owner of the *Bluebell*, and a score of river craft, he it was who lay there, blind at last to all possible methods of money-getting.

The dismal voice went on: "Dunscombe! Well, of all the bloomin' jaunts I've——" and broke off to expectorate viciously in the ditch.

Another voice took up the plaint: "A 'ard case 'ee wos, terr'ble 'ard—yus, it licks!"

"Hard perhaps," a softer voice suggested; "but look at the site he gave to the Wesleyans."

The dismal personage removed his pipe to give force to his opinion: "A chap uz ground 'is 'ands like 'ell."

"And a man who headed many subscription lists—come, you must own to it."

"Own to it? Ya-as, but wot did 'ee do fer the widdas an' kiddies of them he's drowned? Any subscription for them? Garn! It's Dunscombe. I'm not tikin' any."

Opinions for and against waxed in power and volume. The air by the ditch resounded with defence and defiance, with cursings and prayers for silence, the latter brought out by the knowledge that at all hazards the man no longer existed to press on his fellows. Then came a shutter and with its advent there presently marched a solemn cortège to the Garter Pier hotel.

Wakeley Dunscombe was dead. How the news made way in the steaming air, gathering the crowd who lounge, together with the crowd who have no leisure for lounging. How the

busy tongues wagged, clacking of this or that possibility! How necks were craned in eager converse!

"Dead, where?"

"In the shed outside."

"True?"

"Aye, true enough. Bashed. Beaten to death. Indistinguishable."

"Eigh! shockin', shockin'!"

A crowded house that dead house, during all the remaining hours. A silent, solemn house inside; a busy, noisy space within the tap-room doors where bronzed men shuffled the news across sawdust floors.

"H'ast seen 'im?"

"Yaas."

"Looks crewl, don't 'ee?"

"Yaas."

"Leaves a taste in a man's mouth, don't it?"

"Yaas."

Three of rum are necessary to dissipate the taste and the Garter's comfortable bar is close at hand.

A more cultured voice took up the thread, speaking earnestly:

"Terrible business this?"

"Indeed you are right."

"Wonder what could have been the motive?"

"Oh, some of his discharged hands, probably."

"Bad, bad! Want to be diplomatic now-a-days as well as discriminating. I never take on heavy chaps myself—bad policy. Kick too hard if it comes to that. Bah! Ugly business—have a drink?"

Across the counter the clack went on apace.

"What's yours?"

"Somethin' short. Looks ugly, don' 'ee?"

"Yaas; wot d'you say to threes of brandy?"

"Couldn't better it. Two threes of brandy, Miss, straight. Well, here's to us—an' him."

"Gawd! did yer see 'is fice?"

"Naa! don' seem to 'ave none left. Seems like uz if 'ee'd bin' 'it wi' a bloomin' en*gine*, don' 'ee?"

"S'elp me, I'm sick. Two pints of four 'arf, Miss."

"Lumme! wot's the use o' that? Give us two goes o' rum."

"Lawd! the poor head of him."

"Two pints of 'alf an' 'alf."

"Couldn't get a-nigh him."

"Two brandies and a soda, split, Miss."

"I tell yer there ain't no eyes lef' to see. Is there, Bill? I ast you as a chap as knows wot's wot."

"Threes of brandy short."

"Pint o' four 'alf."

Indescribable, baffling reproduction in its grim, crude colouring; but human interest, humanly expressed after the fashion of the viewers.

CHAPTER IV

Micky Doolan Explains

IT WAS Micky Doolan, now mate of the *Tantalus*, who brought to Abbeyville the news of Dunscombe's murder.

To say that versatile Irishman was elated, is to convey but little of the overwhelming importance with which he explained the details to those eager knots of village listeners. Micky Doolan, it appeared, had been the first to see the horror of the ditch. He was the man who had summoned police assistance and volunteered, afterwards, to be one of those who carried the terrible burden to the dead house.

These were matters which contributed to render Micky the person next in importance to the unknown murderer; and materially helped to assuage his thirst at no expense to himself that day.

By nightfall, indeed, he had repeated his story so often, and so many "dhrinks had been slung at him," that there is a possibility of truth in the rumour which grew about his name in this connection.

It was said that Tony Crow found him the following morning sleeping peacefully on the smithy floor, his head pillowed on a bundle of tongs and his arms about the anvil. But Abbeyville loved gossip only one degree less than it loved a mystery; and like all villages could play with the best at exaggeration.

It was in the smithy yard where Doolan first broke ground, and the time was eleven o'clock on the day following the murder. A time propitious for yarns and a hearing, being, in point

of fact, the hour when the British workman takes his lunch. Micky was standing near the open smithy door, a knot of men about him, and Tony Crow, open mouthed and beaded with sweat, amidst the group who faced him.

"Whhat was ut?" said Micky Doolan with a swing of importance. "Ut's murdher, me sons—that's whhat ut was. Who wass ut?" he went on with appalling pride. "Misther Dunscombe, dead as porrk an' appil sauce, an' twice as nasthy."

"Socks!" cried Tony Crow in hollow tones.

"Garn! Drawr it mild, Micky. What are you givin' us? Top it off somebody!" cried the audience with unusual fervour.

"Where wass ut?" said the Irishman again, no whit staggered at this reception of news honestly circumstantial. "Listhen, an' I'll tell yez."

"I'm comin' up the say-wall from beyand the forrt. Bad luck to ye, Jock Stoggers wid yer interruptions. But ye've hit ut; I wass dhown at the Pier—an' ut wass Miss Mary I wass afther. Now will ye let me get on, ye slummer?

"I'm comin' up the say-wall, pickin' me way along the grass because av the mud. The fog's in me eyes an' dhown me throat, an' I'm gropin' along loike a crab on the beach, whin I hear the scuttle av rats in the ditch. 'Divil run away wid ye,' sez I, 'ye skulkin' black bastes. Whhat are ye doin' scarin' the sowl-case out av a man?' Thin wan av the brutes came dhown acrass me thracks an' I slung me cap at ut, an' had to climb the mud to fetch ut.

"Whhat did I see? A pool av blood. Strakes av blood on the stones, the thurmoil av bloody grass an' a man's hat battered out av shape. That's whhat I saw, me sons. 'Glory be, Micky, ye slummer,' sez I, 'is ut dhrinkin' ye've been an' ye're seein' things—or whhat is ut?'

"I rubbed me eyes, lookin' ut fair an' square in the face an'

wint to make investigations. 'What is ut? what is ut?' That's the queschun I'm askin' meself all the toime I'm climbin' dhown the thracks. It's not sheep-stealin' or slaughter-house bizness; there's not enuff blood for that; an' the man's hat don't belong to any sheep-stealin' sogers. Whhat thin is ut?

"I'm starin' through the fog at the marks av boots dhragged dhown the bank. They've torn away the grass, long strakes av ut, an' dhown beyant, lyin' half in, half out the ditch, is a soakin' whelterin' mass.

"Whhat wass ut? Whhat could ut be?"

"A sticket sheep, ma son," said Tony with a short laugh.

"Murdher! That's whhat ut wass," said Micky Doolan, and then he paused.

"How do you know?" cried a voice.

"Which av you," said Micky Doolan in reply, "wud knock his head to blazes, an' thin dhrown ut in a ditch av stinkin' wather? Answer me that who spoke."

"Tain't likely," cried several voices together. "Don't mind his jaw. What did you do?"

"Whhat did I do? I sthooped over an' pulled his head from the wather—for, sez I, 'who's to know he's dead?' I hadn't seen his face then, bhoys. Glory be! I wish I hadn't. I wish ut heartily. But I lifted him be the shoulders an' looked. Mother av God! what a sight ut wass. Ugh, the ugliness av ut all laid opin fer inspechsun an' the slugs set fast alridy."

Tony Crow moved nearer, raising his hands. "Go easy, ye mad Irishman," he cried. "D'ye want me ta bash ma fingers when ah coom t'wark. Socks! ye've gien me a taste it'll coss sothin 't' squench."

"I knew ut," said Micky, triumphantly; "I knew ut. There's not a man I've told ut to, but whhat he's had a thaste."

"Did ye know who it was, Mike? What did you do? Tell us that," cried the rest of the audience.

"I tuk leg bail for ut," he replied; "I never thravelled loike ut in me toime. I ran fer the stachun, told me yarn an' finished up wid a requesht fer a dhrink."

"You shouldn't have run," said a voice from behind.

"Whhat for shouldn't I? Whhat for shouldn't I, Win'bag Saundisson?"

"Because it's not always safe to run," said the *Bluebell's* skipper quietly. "I knew a chap once that nearly got lagged for running."

"Ye did? An' whhat has that to do wid me?"

"Nothing—nothing whatever as far as I know. I'm speaking on general principles simply."

"An' on gen'ral principles I shud say you're wrong, Win'bag," said the Irishman. "If you ask me whhat I think about ut, I shud say the innocent'll run, if he's got mixed up in ut; an' the guilty will stand firm so long as there's no suspicshun laid at his door."

"Socks!" cried Tony Crow, "let us aa' run. We don' want t'harken t'none o' Win'bag's argiments. He's a chice speerit, there's na doot; but just noo ma speerit tak's t'form o' two's o' rum. An' Micky Doolan looks as though he were of the same moind. Out wi' ye—ah'm shuttin' t'door."

In the Southern Trader, the landlord had heard nothing of the rumour. So Micky Doolan's story was retold with embellishments for the benefit of the new audience.

In the afternoon another rumour flew clacking from tongue to tongue. Where it originated no one thought of asking until it came to Tony Crow. It had grown from a simple sentence heard by some gossip earlier in the day, and by dusk, the whole

village knew and discussed the damning words with bated breath.

It came from Riverton the woman said. The police were on the track. Eh! shockin', shockin'. From right amongst us—what could have put it into the lad's head? What lad?

"Jack Elliott."

"Socks! wha telled ye thot lee?"

The blacksmith halted beside the forge staring at the men who spoke.

"Why, everybody says so, Tony."

"Wha's eevrebody?"

"All the village, man. The police are after him, anyway."

"T'Lord sen' he may get ava them. Eigh man! what art thou gein' us?" Tony dropped the sledge and stood before the glowing fire, obviously incapable of further effort. "Ah'll jus' shut oop t'shop," he said, relapsing into his broader dialect as his excitement grew. "Ah'm no fit fer more the day. Jock Elliott! Socks! Ah'm no dootin' ye; but ah cannit believe it of t'lad."

"But he's gone from home, Tony."

The blacksmith made no reply and the other continued:

"They've looked for him far an' wide; his old woman haven't set eyes on him since Saturday night."

Tony sat down on a spar which lay outside the smithy; the others clustered about him, for in that community Tony's opinion was considered absolute.

"They say that Elliott was sacked the night before the murder," said the voice.

"Sackit, fer what?"

"Not playin' it square wi' the Guv'nor. Did a bit on his own, they say. There's a barney on the sea-wall; there's them as heard it."

"Eigh, the puir laddie."

"The Guv'nor had to go down river way at night for some papers, so they say, an' Elliott meets him an' it's all up."

"Wha says aa' this?"

"Everybody, Tony. Lawd! It's Elliott they're lookin' for an' no other, Riverton way."

"Eevrebody! Then ah don' tak' oop wi' it. Ye're like t'a ruck o' cluckin' hens, wi' yer eevrebody."

The group fell back and the blacksmith resumed:

"They say Dunscombe's kickit abaht t'head. Ah'm no dootin' it; but ah know summat abaht keekin'. Ah lairned it oop noarth, an' ah'm gaein' ta see yon dead un. When ah coom back, ah'll tell ye."

Micky Doolan who had circuitously approached the group during the latter sentences, now stood clutching feebly at an anchor. The light from the smithy fire fell full upon him.

"Jack Ell—Elliosh? 'Mpossible. Know—hic—know Jack Ell—Ell—Elliosh bettethanthat. Arroo! Sh'd think I did, hic—Fut wid Ja—Kelliosh—once. Know ut. Arroo! n'eyes-to-luk-out-of—hic—when-he'd—finish——"

Micky Doolan was already suffering visibly from the effects of the taste he could not drown. Someone took him by the arm and led him away; but when Tony Crow returned from Riverton late that night, he was lying almost speechless on a seat in the parlour of the Southern Trader.

"Ah see him," said the blacksmith solemnly. "Ah see him an' ah say Jock Elliott's no the chap thot's wanted. Jock don' wear clogs. Clogs is what yon chap got it from—nowt but clogs cud do it."

"Thruebill!" cried Micky Doolan waking up at this. "Glory be. Na Jakelliosh—hic. 'Mpossible."

CHAPTER V

Mother Keyne

THE ghost of the chary dawn still lingered in the east when Elliott left Swinfleet and struck out down the lanes for Riverton. A sickly dawn it was in all verity, throwing a gleam of light, sad, blurred, watery; then again the land was wrapped in misty trappings, the gray-green trees vanished at the lower branches; the hop kilns, the farms, and isolated ricks all stood in shadow, unseen beside the sodden way.

But the man's thoughts were far from his surroundings. Half an hour ago he had left Susie at the gate of her aunt's cottage and turned to see her still waving him God-speed. The recollection thrilled him in spite of fog and chill east wind, thrilled him in spite of the difficulties with which he was hedged, for had he not kissed her, and had not their last word been of marriage—love's panacea for all entanglement.

Last night on reaching the cottage he had come in burdened with the resolve to tell Susie of his ill luck—that viperous thing which, it appeared, still hovered to baffle him. But he had found so cosy a home, and so real a welcome that he could not mar the picture by proclaiming his idiocy and unfitness. That is what it had come to. His walk to the cottage had decided this. He had played the fool, he had lost control when he should have gripped it, and now, as far as he could discover, Susie would have to pay.

We all pay in some form for the pleasure of giving rein. In blood, in tears, in hard earned cash we pay and then stand

back to brood upon the might-have-beens. It is a law from which few escape. But Elliott decided, in face of that loving welcome, to know the worst before he spoke.

The worst he pictured to be dismissal, the usual difficulty of obtaining fresh employment and a dwindling of that god-send with which he had intended to marry and settle. These were the makeweights he faced in imagination. There was also that threat of Dunscombe's to remember. He would be summoned for assault and battery—perhaps also, as an additional smudge, for drunkenness.

If these came he must meet them. But he had no intention of walking boldly into a trap. He would get down to the river, see his friends, and learn something definite as to his position in this new character he had earned. By the bridle-path the distance to Riverton was little over four miles. He decided to walk it, and to that end moved through by lanes and across fields sodden with moisture till he came to the summit of the hill where lies a junction of four cross roads.

A raw and biting air swept up the slope to meet him. It came from the river carrying with it a hint of the jarring traffic, the fog horns, the bells, the roar of factories eternally grinding out cement, the ring of iron beaten and shaped at the forges. Riverton lay there curtained in fog. The *Stormy Petrel* lay there, perhaps sounding her bell. The knowledge induced Elliott to hasten. It was possible that orders had arrived and they awaited his coming. It was possible too that Dunscombe waited at the office to twit him with the fact that it was tide time.

He came to the level crossing and saw that the gates were closed against him. Over there stood the old woman, custodian of the crossing cabin and guardian of the railway. She held a green flag in her hand and waved him back.

"Bide where you be!" she commanded, and Elliott moved over to join her.

"Morning," he remarked, "cold blow, Missis. The winter's coming in early."

"Raw, Jack lad, raw. Gets in a person's bones like summat sticky. It'll make a carpse of I before I be done wi' it." She watched him sidelong from under bent brows, a shrewd, swift look from eyes apparently rheumed. "A carpse," she added coldly, "as stiff as thick dead un over to the Garter. Lard! I wish I were back to Darset—I do."

She stood there large, placid, and red of face, staring up the track and holding out her gray-green signal, to the train which drew near. Elliott watched her without concern. She was known as a certain prophet in all matters pretaining to rheumatism and the weather. They went hand in hand in this forsaken county. They were interwoven, in a sense, and nothing short of living in "Darset" would alter the fact. Tea was the panacea which enabled her to endure—good, strong, stewed tea set on the hob and allowed to simmer.

Elliott broke into the pause as the train roar grew in volume. "You will have to make them give you your pension," he shouted; "they can afford it; but who's at the Garter now? Jo Mackie or Ted Summers been picked up?"

Again the woman glanced up at him and again said in her blunt fashion, "Naa, an' won't never be, I'll go bail—for why? 'Cause they'm fish meat by this. Blame thick train! 'Ow she do crawl to be zure. Carpse! O! 'ee. Why Dunscombe a carse—'oo else? 'Aven't 'ee heard?"

No—Elliott had not heard, and even now he was uncertain whether he heard aright. He faced this old soul whose delight it was to prattle to all comers of the beauties of "Darset," and questioned in a new voice: "Dunscombe? Sure?"

"Zure? Aye, zure enough. Can't keep they geats shut fer folks as want to see en. They'm a'most as bothersome as the rheumatics. Zure? O, aye; zure enough. Dunscombe—the shipowner man uz has the whaarf out there. Oh, aye—'n now I come to think on't, 'ee were your master too an' all—warn't 'ee, Jack?"

She waved her flag to indicate the riverside, and the train drew slowly up, rumbling in the fog. Elliott appeared suddenly fascinated by the approach of that iron mass. His face had taken a tinge of yellow which blended with the day. He leaned forward with questions framed, with eyes which entreated —yet said no word. The old woman saw and resumed her prattle.

"Down to Darset," she asserted, "there's nary a fog like to this. Fogs there are white, like steam. You'm good fer a hun'ard—not that I be hankerin' arter sech long days. Zeventy'll about do I. My old man, 'ee were zeventy-vive 'an a blame zight better to a gone at zeventy. Got wizened up wi' thick owld pain o' hissen an' might a bin dead—years. Eigh? 'Oo killed Dunscombe? La—'oo d'ye suspeck? One of 'is chaps they zay up to Garter—one of 'is chaps—" She eyed him sidelong with sparrow-like fidelity despite her bulk of form.

A detonator exploded as the train drew past. "One," said the gatekeeper. A second followed at an interval which did not please her. "Two," she commented; "right number; but the Lard only knows why 'ee were so long making up 'is mind to go off—blame if I do."

The train lumbered into the fog lying dense over Riverton and the woman laboriously opened the gates.

Elliott moved a few paces to resume his journey, then paused, twisted swiftly on his heel as though about to start on a race

and drew up. He fumbled in his pocket for a pipe, placed it between his teeth and struck a match. He sucked a moment in silence, but no smoke came. He looked into the bowl and discovered that the pipe was empty.

Again he fumbled, hand deep in pocket, produced a twist of tobacco, filled and lighted. The hand holding the match might have been stricken with a palsy, the teeth which held the stem seemed intent on dropping it. He shivered as though the disease had suddenly widened its grip and for a moment there appeared a new look in eyes usually steady—a tense, beaten, scared look which the majority of people facing him would have recognised at once. So he decided drawing to cover. But the old woman, whose faculties were no longer alert, whose eyes were rheumed, who delighted in vague recollections of "Darset"—well, she at all events would——

From within the cottage came the sharp *ting-ting* of the telegraph asking for attention. The movement made by the old woman as she crossed to reply broke the thread. She gave a signal and came into the rustic porch which framed her door. Over the archway and trellis were the dying tendrils of a clematis. They rustled in the chill breeze high up about the woman's head and she drew her shawl a shade more closely.

Elliott saw these things as he stood there halting beside the track. He noted the curve of the rails dwindling away into the distance, examined the levels and found them higher on this side than on that. He marked the fact that the gulls swept down upon a little space where there was a pool in the marsh-land and emerged with something in their beaks; but the things failed to interest him. Across the panorama of moving and still life there stood the picture of a man lying bruised and bleeding high on the sea-wall—a picture which grew in force

and detail as though under the hand of an artist busy with his brushes.

Dunscombe was the centre of that picture—and Dunscombe was dead—lying at the Garter—struck down by one of his chaps. If that were so then he—— Pish! he sucked at his pipe, but it had gone out. He pressed down the tobacco and withdrew his finger swearing—the damned thing—like the rest of us—can't go straight—always contrary—always——

He looked up, a swift, troubled look, and discovered the old woman at his elbow.

"Jack, lad," she said, "You'm waitin'. Forgot somethin' seemin'ly. There's the telegraft in my cabin—an' it's nigh on tide time. You'm wantin' to——"

Elliott drew himself together with a jerky fling of one hand. "Aye," he said, "but what it is I've forgotten I can't think—it's clean gone. Funny, isn't it?" he laughed.

"Baccy?" said the old woman eyeing him.

Elliott slapped his pocket. "No," he decided, "it's not baccy."

"Pipe?"

"No—see," he produced it, holding it up.

"Arders?"

"No; I've had none—as yet."

"An' Dunscombe won't be givin' none this mornen'?"

"Have you seen him?" Elliott flung out. "Are you sure he's dead? How d'you know?"

"'Av I seen en? No, Jack, I 'avn't seen en an' don' want. But there's a many as 'as. Down to Garter they say as they can't keep folk away no more than flies off'n meat. Human natur'. Aye sure. But I an't seen en."

Elliott still stood regarding this enigma as a man regards a landscape, far off, on which certain figures are in motion. He

appeared to be engaged in a mental argument, a calculation of chances from which the gate-keeper pulled him with a jerk.

"If you'm bent on goin' to see en," she advised, "go when it's dark—or better still don't you go at all. 'Tain't werf it. Every one is goin' an' comin' past 'ere. Traps, carts, barras—even the police—harse-police, Jack. Can't keep my geats shut for 'em. I 'ear 'ee's a zight. Cruel 'ard he was on 'is hands. A chap like that wouldn't live long down to Darset—blame if 'ee would. A nasty, lecherous, w'eezy—Ah! so you'm goin' back arter all—good. There won't be no work to-day—'n' I 'aven't sot eyes on you, Jack, lad—mind that."

Elliott moved down the road in a species of dream. The woman's words rang in his brain; but he was uncertain of their meaning. Did she intend to warn him—and if so, why? He had struck this man. He had seen him lying there stunned. Stunned but breathing. He was very certain of this fact. But suppose by chance the fellow had not regained consciousness—suppose he had been struck on some vital part and had died—then——

Elliott pushed the question aside. He decided it was absurd, impossible, and yet, as his ears had heard, down there at the Garter lay evidence, indisputable evidence.

He moved more rapidly down the road and came to a crossing. On the left were the marshes, on the right roads all converging on Riverton. It seemed at this moment that it was necessary to think, to gain time and thresh this matter out—then as he halted there a woman moved out of the mists coming from the river. She paused on seeing him and drawing near said:

"My friend of the other night, if I don't mistake you?"

Elliott met her gaze with that new-born desire for solitude lurking in his eyes. He decided that this woman dressed in black and wearing round her neck a fur boa, also of black,

was the woman of the woods and an inquisitor. She stood before him with her quizzical smile, her black garments accentuating the extreme strawiness of her hair, obviously uncertain of his identity. Yet he could not bring himself to deny recollection—despite the fact that he considered it necessary. After a moment he replied in the affirmative: "Yes; that's me."

The woman marked his confusion but took no heed. "When I met you the other night," she smiled, "I had no idea you were a sailor. But now I see that you are and I wonder whether you could help me find someone—he is a sailor also; a river captain, I believe—James Saunderson."

"Jim Saunderson?"

"Ah! I see you know him. Tell me—tell me!" She stepped nearer, holding out her hands, but Elliott had no desire for this or any conversation. The reply had slipped before he was aware how much it implicated him. It remained therefore to fence with this woman, to bluff her, learn whether she had been near the Garter and give nothing in return. He drew himself together with an effort.

"In a way," he replied. "Yes, I have heard of him."

"Where, here or in Abbeyville?"

"He was here, but I believe he has gone north."

"North?"

"Aye—the Tyne, Shields or some place up there." Then, seeing the woman searching his face, "and—well, as I've answered your questions, perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me whether you've been to the Garter?"

The woman drew back, her eyes flashing. "Every one is talking of that. What do I know about it? Pardon—you were kind to me that night. Yes; it is some ship-owner, a hard man, Dunscombe: do you know him?"

"Is he dead?"

"Yes."

Elliott fumbled with the buttons of his coat. He glanced up at his companion. "Who—that is, how did it come about?"

The woman put up her veil and again smiled. "I am not sure. They tell me he was knocked down and is cut horribly."

"Any word of who did it?"

"One of his hands, I believe. Why, did you know him too?"

Despite the curious numbness which surrounded him he knew that this woman was watching him with greedy eyes, taking in details of his appearance, perhaps marking him down for the future description. He held his head erect therefore and replied again with an evasion.

"I have heard of him. And I believe he was a hard master, as you say. Thanks—yes, and as to Saunderson, I don't know how long he will remain north. I scarcely knew much of him and we aren't cousins. He wasn't much here—very few of us are. So—I will be getting along."

He turned on his heel and crossed the road.

Out there in the yellowness lay the marshes and silence. The marshes where no people wandered asking questions, where nothing moved but the shadows, and the silence was the silence of those who are asleep.

CHAPTER VI

The Woman Pays

TO FIND pleasure in the marshes lying east of the level crossing one needs few cares. A dog, a gun, and brisk weather is a seductive mixture—for ground game, snipe and widgeon are to be found by the man who loves rough shooting and who has the necessary permit; but Elliott was not of these; nor was the weather exactly heartening. In point of fact it was abominable. The ground had arrived at that stage when the absorption of more moisture was impossible. When, if you moved from certain beaten tracks you stood a very fair chance of never moving again without assistance.

But these were considerations of no weight with Elliott. He knew the marshes and, on the other hand, had gleaned some knowledge of the risks he ran elsewhere. He preferred the marshes.

In the near distance a quaint old hutch reared its rugged outline against the smoke-like mist. Beside it lay a ditch of stagnant water edged by reeds. Beyond there rolled the marshes of the Hundred of Hoo, interspersed with ditches and embankments, astride of which were the gates which began and ended there. Elliott moved onward shrouded by the mist, at liberty to smoke or walk or think untroubled by the ghost of capture. He came to the hutch and entered.

From an artistic point of view the thing left nothing to be desired; but art and comfort frequently roll wide as the hills. This picturesque hutch was simply the inverted hull of an

ancient ketch or bawlie-boy* set on two tiers of bricks, a fire place at one end, a door at the other. In summer it was used occasionally by the shepherds, sometimes formed a snuggery for the marsh bailiffs, sometimes a rendezvous for tramps. No one inhabited it permanently. Some enterprising fisherman had built it long ago and, when he died, the owner of the marshes called it his.

Here at all events Elliott was secure for hours—for in the fog then regnant he knew no marsh bailiff nor shepherd would be abroad. Here he would have time to formulate some plan, time to arrange how he might warn Susie of what had happened. He sat down amidst a litter of straw, head sunk, eyes searching the doorway for possible intruders.

A long while he remained thus, a strained look on a face betokening youth and immunity from care; a look becoming nervously expectant under its new burden. Dunscombe was dead. He acknowledged that this fact stood. It was useless to deny it. And if Dunscombe was dead, then it was possible he had killed him. It was the natural sequence, the corollary of his action—yet, for a moment, it appeared impossible. Again, on consideration, he found it possible—a difference in terms that struck him as being out of all proportion to the weight of hazard involved.

Once more he leaned forward, searching his memory for the order of events as they occurred that night. Dunscombe met him, jeering and ordering him as though he were a dog. Dunscombe, when he had retaliated in some small measure, broached this question of "doing a bit on his own" as they phrase it, and he had denied it—blusteringly, angrily. Then Dunscombe had called him a liar and a thief and he had struck

* Shrimper.

him down. "As I would strike him again—now, by God! if he called me a liar and a thief."

Elliott rose from his seat and gave emphasis to his opinion: "As I would strike any man who called me a liar and a thief—as——. Sst! The man is dead—dead—and I——. What's that?"

He moved to the small window and set it wide. The fog streamed in. He discovered a group of plover whirling about the hutch seeking a new pitch. Nothing else. All fog and steam and mist. The world a-sweat with the burden it bore—nothing else. Again he returned to his seat and again after a lapse of time crept to the window. Nothing—only the gulls, the plover and silence; a silence that penetrated as the fog penetrated and was as productive of shadows.

He returned to his seat, taking himself to task. What a coward he had become. How easily he trembled. He swore softly this was not so—that he had cause, cause sufficient to break the heart of a statue.

Dunscombe was dead. If this thing were true then was it not possible the blow he had struck had killed him. Mother Keyne, the old gate-keeper, had hinted pretty plainly her view of the affair. Or was it her view? Was it not possible that she had heard something and intended to warn him? Of course it was possible—yet—— No—no—the thing was impossible—he announced it plainly staring at the gap in the roof. Then, if that were so, came in mocking comment, why was he in hiding? Why did he cower there when he should be at the river attending his work?

He played into these people's hands by remaining hidden. It was suicide. He must get out and face it—face it. That was the only thing a man could do without shame.

"Face it!" He rose at the word and crossed towards the

door. Then, driving him back, thwarting him, came the knowledge that Susie awaited his return that night at Swinfleet. That if he faced this thing now, he might not be able to see her or explain what had happened. Others would do that for him —people who desired to keep them apart. No; he could not face it yet. He must see Susie first. He must marry her. That, at all hazards, was a duty he dared not postpone. If the worst came, and she desired it, he must marry her at once, and then—but why conjure with the thing. He admitted the absurdity, but it stood there a very potent force to hold him tied to the hutch during all remaining hours of daylight; if he would see Susie again in freedom.

Nine hours on the marshes, not with dog and gun, but with misery for companion; nine hours listening for footsteps which never came, searching out the genesis of those sounds which at intervals smote him; nine hours fasting, dragging at the essential facts which dogged him—a man need be strong to stand so severe a strain and remain steadfast to the resolve he had formed.

He had come into that solitude for thought and to avoid a capture which at the moment appeared barely feasible, and with thought had come this dread thing, this sequence of events which bore down upon him, baffled him, and kept him prisoner against his will.

He questioned of the four walls: What had he done to bring this misery into the life of a girl he admittedly loved? But no answer came to cheer him, only the eternal cry of the gulls, and the swirl of their wings as they passed the hutch. The hours dragged on. Sometimes the man leaned forward dozing, sometimes stood watching the marsh tracks converging on the hutch, sometimes paced to and fro the narrow floor. It grew late. Elliott came to the door and looked out. The silence

was maintained. The land retained its curtain. The gulls were fewer in number.

The sun had vanished from a sky it had not touched since dawn when at length Elliott emerged from his shelter. He walked down the sodden walls, feeling the path with a stake. Movement freshened him. He was on his way to greet Susie and to tell her—his news.

He came to the lane where, that morning, he had met and fenced with the inquisitor of the woods. It was silent now—silent as the marshes had been. Up there perhaps a mile distant was the old gate-keeper with her bundle of fog signals and her flag; farther still, the river with its burden of shipping and ebbing stream. Had it not been for Susie, at this moment he would have passed straight and swift to the river and there, shrouded by the fog, would have made his way to some land where a man had chances—the land of which we always prate when misfortune strikes us in our own.

Up the lanes, shadowed by the trees and sunk in fog; along a desolate stretch of highroad, avoiding the glare of lamps set now to hinder him, and so to the edge of the town. One street he was compelled to face. In the morning he had traversed it humming a tune, now he traversed it seeing pursuers at every corner. Already he had run the gauntlet of a dozen imaginary captures when someone clutched him by the arm.

He swung free with a savage gesture.

"What do you want? Stand back!" he cried.

"Whisht! how you jump to be sure. Sonny, take us home; it's cruel cold on the streets to-night. You won't—then stand us so'thin'. O Gawd, it's cold."

"Out of my way, what the devil do you mean?"

"My word, if it ain't Jack Elliott!"

"Well?"

He halted quickly enough now, but with one arm raised to strike. The girl laughed quietly.

"You don't mind me," she whispered, "not you. But Dolly Crassley isn't the gell to ferget them as has done her a turn. You mind the row at the door of the Scorpion, Jack? I know you do. Well, it's my turn now. Hist! *you're wanted*—an' there's a peeler a top of the street."

"Wanted? Ah, I might have known it." He mopped at his forehead, standing irresolute. The girl stared.

"Then w'y are you here?" she questioned. "'Tain't safe. Walk beside me to the turnin'. I've got a room there."

"I am bound to see some one," he explained; "I must go out——"

"Someone wot spells miss before 'er name?" she questioned swiftly. "Nay, don't start an' swear, sonny. I'm not so black as I'm painted. It's nat'ral you should want to see her; but, I'm tellin' you, don't you go townways. Keep in the dark, an' if there's lamps about, wait till the fog smothers 'em. How did it come about, sonny?"

"He called me a liar and a thief and I struck him."

"Haigh! you're right. You shouldn't be so strong."

They reached the house unseen and the girl pushed him within. "Stay there," she whispered, "while I look round. No—they might tear the tongue out of me mouth afore I'd say a word to get you took. They don't love me—I don't love them. They hustle—I give 'em the go-bye—stay quiet."

She left him standing and passed into the street. From somewhere upstairs came the noise of glasses and the pop of a drawn cork. A woman laughed and in the ensuing silence it seemed that all things happened—capture, trial, judgment, yet when the girl returned Elliott acknowledged he still was safe.

"All clear," she said in answer; "how far are you goin'?"

"Swinfleet."

"It's miles—goin' to walk it?"

"Yes."

The girl examined him in the dim light. "I like your pluck," she announced, then after a moment's hesitation: "'Ere—can you bike?"

"Yes."

"Got any machine?"

"Not here."

"Right; I'll find you one. Stay quiet."

She left him again and in five minutes returned wheeling a cycle. "It's a gell's," she explained, "my chum's—her wot's laughin' upstairs. You can ride it, I doubt? She's as tall as you. Good—leave it in this shed when you come back. So-long, sonny—aye—fer the sake of wot you done fer me—so-long."

She touched him on the shoulder and was gone.

Who was she? No one—worse than no one. Just a towsled young daughter of the gutter in her prime and with as keen a hatred of wedlock since her man had left her, as to the manner born. An impossible person? Perhaps—yet remember the appaling conditions in which she moved.

Sixteen years of draggle-tailed existence, then marriage. A marriage of the slums, carried out in slum fashion with lavish supplies of beer. Six months later, brutal usage, desertion, motherhood. At the end of twelve, childless and driven to the streets for sustenance. Who was she? This and many other things quite impossible of narration.

Elliott passed on now in full knowledge of the peril in which he stood. No longer came those questions which had tortured him. Dunscombe was dead and he was wanted for the

murder. He moved in a dream. The way was peopled with shadows flitting ghost-like to harass him, angling to take him unawares.

Without a light, keeping steadily to the centre of the road he passed cautiously through the fog. Once a passenger crossing the track complained of his unmannerly approach; but Elliott swerved wide and held on his way till Riverton and its traffic were left behind. Then on—more swiftly now—down that highroad which should carry him to Swinfleet; on through the grim, dark night, eyes concentrated on the track, ears alert for passing carts, head bent, on through the stillness, the raw air invigorating him, the soft swish of the tyres inspiring him, the picture of Susie standing there before him as a guide—on till out of the murk there came the thud of a horse's hoofs and a lantern shone in his eyes.

"What are you doing without lights, eh?" came the question to annoy him. Then with a swift turn the horseman was passed and Elliott riding for freedom.

"Halt there, in the King's name!" sounded from the rearward veil of fog. "Halt! I say."

The constable had turned and was riding to overtake him. The hoof sounds came up to Elliott now with the rythmic swing of a gallop. He would be ridden down at that pace. A stone in the road, a ruck, and he would be at his enemy's mercy —he who was wanted, and for whom they searched.

In a moment he swerved, slowed and drew up beside the hedge. The horseman passed on swearing.

Then again in the silence, swiftly pushing his machine, Elliott doubled on his tracks, came round to a bye road and rode once more for Swinfleet. So, onward, till the lane widened, the trees fell away and the glare from the cottage loomed yellow close at hand.

A girl stood near the uncurtained window—Susie waiting for him and straining her eyes in the fog. The light from the lamp shone on her red-gold hair. He sprang from his machine, unlatched the gate and entered. Susie started at his approach and screened her eyes.

"Oh, it's Jack—it's Jack!" she cried. And in a moment, despite his signal for caution, the door was thrown wide and Susie lay in his arms. "My darling," she whispered. "How late you are and how wet!"

"Hist, deary!"

"Why? There's no one here, only me. And I have been waiting for you—waiting. Do you understand? Aunty's out—listening to uncle, who is on the village council, you know, and I am all alone. So horribly alone. Come in, dear heart, come in."

He glanced over his shoulder, staring into the fog he had escaped. "Turn down the light, Susie, and draw the curtains —else I can't."

She watched him with a quizzical glance, half of laughter, half of coquetry. "Can't? Silly boy. Why, who do you think will be spying on us in this quiet place? But you shall have your way." She entered the room, drew the curtains, extinguished the lamp and returned. "There, will that do? Is it dark enough—dark enough for you to see to——Jack, dear," she continued drawing back and looking in his face, "do you know—that you have forgotten to—to——"

Her lips framed for kisses quivered beneath his own. He caught her to him, folding her in his arms with a passion that was terrible to remember and his cry rang out: "Oh God! my lass, my lass!"

She turned to him now and stood smoothing back his hair. That something was wrong she knew intuitively. She kissed

him on the lips. "What is it, dear?" she begged, "tell me—tell me."

He blurted the thing, his face buried in her hair. "There is trouble in the wind, Susie, and I——"

"Then we must meet it," she reminded him.

"*We* can't, Susie—it's me—me."

"In a few days we shall be one," she decided flushing.

"I daren't wait for that. If we are to be married—if you still want me when you know—we must be married at once. Somewhere—God knows where."

She shook back her hair and smiled. The fire light fell on a face as white as the blouse she wore, yet she smiled. "If—if—what have I done, Jack, to make you doubt me? When I know—and if! Jack, what is it?"

"I'm wanted, lass. Wanted."

The words were said but she looked at him no wiser. "Wanted, Jack?"

"Aye. Understand me—this is no paltry business, nothing to snivel over and done with. It's trouble—big and definite Susie—Dunscombe's dead."

Silence ensued; cold, torturing, pregnant with sorrow. Jack holding the girl close, holding her crushed, Susie looking up and striving in the darkness to read his eyes. At length she spoke: "Dunscombe dead? Well, what has that to do with us?"

"I struck him, Susie—I——"

"Oh! but Jack, Jack! I'll not believe it. I will not believe it—you didn't try—that is——"

"No, no! As God is my witness I meant to hit him. I meant to knock him down if I could. Why? Because he called me a liar and a thief. Those were his words and I laid him out."

"My darling—I knew it." She had come through darkness into light. Her eyes gleamed. She clung to him caressing his brow with one hand, but she clung trembling.

"It was all about a bit of pluck I gave your father," he explained; "it happened some time ago. How he knew of it passes me by. But he did know—and I must run if I am to marry you—understand?"

"Wait," she begged. "Tell me . . . let me think."

He complied, speaking fast and with a nervous insistence that was painful to hear: "As you will. This is what happened. It's a month ago—more. I'm lying on the tide waiting for a job when the *Tantalus* came driving past. She doesn't steer as handy as she did and the old man looks like driving ashore on the Nore. We weren't twenty yards away. It's dead calm. And I dropped under the bow and plucked her into deeper water. There was never any question of towing, or payment—and now the Guv'nor looks me in the face and says I squared it—took a crown from the old man and never reported it.

"What did I say? Psh! I was mad—I was mad. He had given me jaw before he broke ground over this. I told him it was a lie. Then he said he would prosecute me and called me a liar and a thief. That's what passed, as God is my Judge."

"I knew it, darling. You are not to blame."

"But I'm wanted, Susie—and I must run."

"Why? Surely, surely it is better to face it."

"I daren't—not if we are to be married. It may take months if once I give up—I might be locked up a year; it would be a jury case—assizes and all the rest."

"Jack! you *must* face it."

The girl was white to the tips of her ears. She clung to him

now, her lips quivering, her arms twined about his neck. He strove for release. The helplessness of his position assailed him and he broke out passionately:

"Don't make it harder, lass. Better let me go. I've got the luck of the devil—the luck of the devil. Chuck me. Tell me you never want to see me again, and I'll walk in and face them. Face them and let them prove what they will——"

"Jack! I love you—I love you!"

"Men call me by an ugly name," he groaned; "there's none worse."

"You are my husband," she whispered still holding him.

"Your husband's life isn't worth the snuff of a candle, Susie. Look it square in the face. Suppose they found extenuating circumstances—how does that better me? It's manslaughter then—that any good to me or you? Better hang and have done with it—better——"

"Don't—don't. My darling!" she cried in a passion of tears.

"God love you!" he faltered, the sight of her agony stifling him. "Hold on. I'm wrong. I had no right to tell you that; it might never come. But, Susie, it's what I've got to face and if we are to be married first, I must run. There's no other way of doing it. Is there?"

She clung to him, hiding her face on his shoulder. She shook her head, but she sobbed more quietly.

"Susie," he went on, "we must be married—must," he reiterated, taking her by the arms and looking into her face. "I must get across the water. Susie, I'm quitting Riverton to-night by the only way left open. By river. I have no other chance—the patrols are out, the police are after me—met me coming here; but to-morrow I'll be across if I have to row every mile of the way. I know Antwerp, Havre, Dieppe—any

of them will suit my book—and then we can talk about facing it——"

She put up her hand and checked him. "You will take me, Jack?" she whispered.

"I can't, lass. Not to-night. It's impossible."

The girl restrained her tears. She pushed him from her and stood there white and drooping. "Go, darling," she begged. "Go. I must not keep you—go, while I am strong."

"I will write from foreign, Susie. Letters to Riverton post office—you understand?"

She nodded gravely, her face in shadow.

"You shall follow me out, dear. I've got some money. I'll write about it. Susie, I must go—I must go."

They stood a moment locked in each other's arms, then Susie drew back. "God bless you, Jack," she faltered.

"God love you, lass."

Night received him.

Part III

The River of Life

CHAPTER I

Inquisitorial

THREE days fog, then a gale of wind. This was the order of things, and the day of the gale was also the day of the inquest.

The pier hotel was crowded, the air reeking with the odour of strong tobacco and mixed drinks. Outside the wind howled without ceasing, the river combed savagely on the flood, and, at high water, sloshed over the sea-wall and fell in columns of spray on the seats before the hotel. Upstairs, in a long and low-ceiled room, sat the Coroner and his Court and before them stood or lounged a group of eager listeners, water-side folk with one exception—Tony Crow.

A dreary business done on a dreary day in the old, stupid fashion so dear to the hearts of Englishmen, was in full swing. Micky Doolan was there, Win'bag Saunderson, the blacksmith, the mate who had rowed Elliott ashore in the fog, the skipper of the barge which lay that night aground—all were there, and all had spoken after their diverse fashions. Elliott alone was missing. Where was this man, Elliott? All the evidence turned on Elliott—who knew anything of his movements? Apparently, no one.

His landlady, described in the generic term "old woman," spoke in whispers as she related incidents bearing on nothing in particular and with the accompaniment of gross circumlocution. Perhaps only one or two facts were noticeable in her remarks: they bore on Elliott's good nature. He was a good lad, there was no two ways about that. He never troubled no one; he was always kind and regular; likewise his reckonin' was paid on the nail. He left home a Sunday mornin', sayin' he was bound away to a job on the river. Since that she had not set eyes on him.

His mate spoke to the fact that there was no job on the river on Sunday—he minded it, because he was on board with his wife that day, who, bein' new-married, wanted to see the boat. He never set eyes on the skipper all day. Yaas, he rowed him ashore on Saturday night. It was as thick as peas puddin'; he knew that for he was nigh on three hours findin' his road back to the tug—but he heard the row on the wall. Leastways, part of it he heard—not all. Yaas, it was Dunscombe the row was with.

The skipper of the barge testified in similar fashion but amplified his remarks by stating more particularly the details of the row. Damning evidence, every word.

Micky Doolan spoke also to the finding, with a tongue which tripped sadly after his recent debauch. He knew every sentence by heart and told it with great reluctance. But they dragged it from him bit by bit, and at length he was ordered, with some asperity, to stand down.

The evidence stood solid, unutterably solid, damning for Elliott. Only Tony Crow of all the bunch had ventured any extended refutation of the exultant police testimony, and he naturally was looked upon with suspicion.

"What did he knaw abaht it? No so much—but he had had

eexperience o' keekin', an' wi' their gude leaves, yon was dun wi' nowt but clogs. How did he knaw? He'didn't knaw; but eexperience had taught Tony mony things. Were ah there? Na—ah were not there—ah were at t' smeethy."

Why then was he occupying the time of the court?

"Because ah have ma doots."

"Doubts! Who ever heard of such twaddle. Doubts are not evidence. Stand down."

So the tall, simple-hearted blacksmith stood down, and twisted his cap monotonously as he listened. The Coroner now addressed the jury, and the jury having agreed without any further inquiry into the mythical region of Tony's doubts, the inquest was adjourned and the police once more breathed freely. They recognised that their case was won, a desideratum as all men are ready to acknowledge, therefore it was only in the nature of things that they should show an exultant face.

All this was done on the day of the gale, succeeding the fog, within sound of the wailing horns on the river, amidst the blather and spume of an angry Thames, some half-mile distant from the ditch with its stagnant water and ugly crimson stains. And the business of the hotel was amazingly brisk. For inquests are productive of talk, of speculation, of an inquisitive tribe of men; and these things, in turn, are productive of smoke and the guzzling of some astonishingly bad liquor.

It fell so on this occasion: and on the day of the adjourned inquiry, the memory of the people who sold was ransacked, in vain for an equally propitious event.

On this day a verdict of wilful murder was returned against Elliott, and Tony Crow went back to the smithy a wrathful and discredited man.

But the hero of all this clack had vanished.

CHAPTER II

Sutcliffe's Return

A FOG was growing as the *Tantalus* drove slowly to her berth at the foot of the Reach which winds past quiet Abbeyville. George Sutcliffe navigated her, gave orders to her meagre crew, steered, and from time to time stared out under the foot of the mainsail to discover in the blur of smoke and fog lying over the village, that trim girl form which never yet had failed to welcome him.

He was hungry always, on these homeward trips, for the first glimpse of his daughter. He looked for her presence—but to-day Susie had not appeared at the foot of the little garden. Therefore, for some reason, she had not expected him, and had remained at home. His wife also would be at home. But Sutcliffe did not think of his wife—he thought only of Susie.

He was a tall man, slightly bent in form, wearing the curly, and now iron-gray, ringlets of the old-time coasting skipper, beneath his blue-peaked cap. He had the air of one who has struggled and has been quite effectually beaten. His second marriage had brought into his eyes the look one sees in the face of all sufferers. He no longer had hope. He moved in a circle of events each of which might end matters without warning. Indeed, had it not been for Susie he would have sunk beneath the fierce waters and moved to that long home of his, unsorrowfully.

But the girl was a link with the past which no stretched misery could sever. The thought of her pretty face and win-

ning child-ways, buoyed him on his voyage and tied him to the old home, as frequently a baby voice and innocent laughter will tie man to the impossible.

Meanwhile the brig arrived at her anchorage. Sutcliffe saw her moored, landed and went up the pier. He decided mentally that Susie must, for some reason, be at the vicarage. Then, as he walked the village street, giving "What cheer, skipper," and "What ho, mate," to one and another of his acquaintances, he noticed how the people standing gossiping at their doors, turned to watch him as he passed.

There had been a time when this would have caused him to pause, but not now. In these days he was accustomed to trouble and now he failed to connect their behaviour with himself in any way. Besides, since his second marriage, he had learned that silence is discretion; that to see, and not to see, is sometimes wisdom.

He stepped across the little garden and stood in the doorway of his home. It was dreary and silent. Out in the back, he caught the sound of scrubbing, and the click of iron-ringed pattens—signals unmistakable, to Sutcliffe, that his wife was on the war path. He shut the door quietly and, entering the kitchen, sat down in the dismal light of a flickering oil lamp to smoke his pipe. Susie must certainly be at the vicarage. His pipe was a solace.

But he was not long left in peace. The odour of burning tobacco found its way outside. Mrs. Sutcliffe offered many resentful remarks to the neighbouring back yards, then, unable to locate the nuisance, opened the kitchen door and looked in.

Sutcliffe smoked on without speaking.

"Lawd!" cried the woman with emphasis; "wot a skear you give a person with your pipes an' smoke an' filth. When did you come in?"

"A while ago."

"How long's that?"

"Not so long."

"Not so long! Haigh! hear 'im. Lissen to 'im. Here he is at 'ome—sittin' still as a stuffed hog, an' all the world a gapin' at him."

Mrs. Sutcliffe bustled energetically about the room dusting and reversing the order of the furniture. Her husband smoked in silence.

" 'Deed," she went on, with a pause of infinite scorn as she viewed her partner's bald head, " 'Deed, but there's no fule like an old fule. Lawd! if I were a man I wouldn't sit down an' twiddle me thumbs. I'd ack—that's wot I'd do."

Several sniffs followed this assertion. They were the only sounds in the kitchen for some minutes. Outside the wind moaned without ceasing and the river broke sorrowfully on the foreshore. But Sutcliffe's eyes were shut.

"Gells is like calves," his wife continued argumentatively. "You must ring 'em if you want to lead 'em. That's wot I say, an' it's wot I'd do with every lass risin' seventeen, if I 'ad my way. Why would I?" she asked in a querulous treble, although her husband had made no remark. "Because Satan goeth about like a roarin' lion, Capting Sutcliffe, seekin' whom he may devour. It's writ in the Book, an' Mr. Slowboy brought it before us last Sunday most forcible. Sometimes Satan taketh untoe himself the form of a young man with a black mastache, an' great is the fall thereof."

Mrs. Sutcliffe's reminiscences of Bible lore, taken from the lips of this spectacled divine, who eschewed clerical garments and boldly preached in his work-a-day clothes, had no effect on the old man. He was accustomed to pulverised versions of Holy Writ. They had been launched at his head frequently

during some fifteen years of married life, and had become innocuous from iteration. He continued to smoke stolidly. His wife came across the kitchen and stood before him sniffing.

Now there is something very exasperating in a sniff, judiciously administered, and with proper accentuation. The old man opened his eyes, took his pipe from his lips and said, "Shut it, Missis."

"I won't shut it," the woman returned, quickly mollified at the effect of her battery; "I ain't goin' to shut it. W'y here's Capting Saundisson, as good a man as ever stepped, willin' to marry the gell, or, says he, 'Pay me that fif-ety pound you owe me.' Though, p'raps 'ee won't feel that way—egspecially now."

Sutcliffe woke up at once, eyeing this plotter with impatience. "What do you mean?" he cried.

"A-h-h-h-h!" said Mrs. Sutcliffe dolorously.

"Hold your noise!" he returned. "I won't have the lass worried. Lumme! you make a big song about your God-fearin' an' your chapel-goin', but you're worse than a bloomin' Turk, an' so's Saunderson if he thinks I'm goin' to sell the lass."

"Owe no man anything," cried Mrs. Sutcliffe austerely.

"Blatherskites!"

"No, George, not blatherskites, nor any other heathenish worrud. It's ondecent, it's on-christian. Tell me where you find it writ? It's not in Gawd's 'Oly Book. It's an infidel worrud—a worrud as you have picked up amongst the Turks an' other naked seviges."

The old man watched her with weary eyes.

"It's almost a pity we can't pick up some other of their customs whiles we are about it," he said.

"An' wot might they be?" Mrs. Sutcliffe questioned with a sniff of intense interest; for she, like many other estimable

females, evinced keen interest in scandalous revelations. They gave her the opportunity of tasting emotions to which, otherwise, she was a stranger, and enabled her, also, to air her own peculiar morality with fitting diatribes.

"They chuck old wimmen an' them as has tongues, into the Bos'prus," said Sutcliffe with a far away gleam of merriment. "That's what they do, Missis."

"Haigh!" shrieked Mrs. Sutcliffe, but standing severely still. "Haigh! how long, O Lawd! How long! Haigh! an' to think it's come to this after fifteen years of scrudgin'; fifteen years of slavin'. George Sutcliffe," she continued slowly, and shaking a prophetic forefinger at her silent lord and master, "the day will come when you'll be sorry for them worruds—an' will say——"

"Oh Lord! give us a rest," sighed the old man wistfully. "If this isn't as bad as a gale o' wind in a leaky ship—as the sayin' is—I don't know."

"There is no peace, saith my Gawd, fer the wicked," said his wife.

Captain Sutcliffe rose from his chair. The fire had gone out, so also had his pipe. The paraffin lamp burnt low, with a gurgling noise in its throat. The house was pervaded with an atmosphere of bickering and misery, impossible to dissociate from the figures of forlorn weariness and nagging the two presented.

"I'm goin' out," said the Captain, moving towards the door.

"You'd best not."

"What's to hinder me?"

"Susie."

Mrs. Sutcliffe's voice dropped. Her husband stood in the doorway watching her with angry eyes.

"Susie?" he cried. "What do you mean? T'hell wiv you

an' your naggin'—you'll drive a man mad. Wheer's the lass?"

"Gone."

"Gone—wheer to?"

"To her lover, likely as not."

Sutcliffe closed the door and stood confronting her with a new sternness.

"What do you mean? Speak straight, wumman!" he rapped out. "Do you hear me—wheer's the lass?"

"I turned her out. I could do nothin' else. All the village is talkin' of her an' her disgraceful goin's on. I won't 'ave it in my house."

Mrs. Sutcliffe's courage returned now the worst was said. The sound of her own voice acted as an incentive; she tossed her head sniffing aloud in self-justification.

"You turned—the lass out? Out . . . of . . . your house. All the village . . . is . . . talkin' of her. You—what did you do, wumman?"

"I turned her out—that's wot I did, George. I speak it plain, don't I?"

"You . . . turned out . . . t'lass?" The old man spoke now in a slow, dazed fashion, as though repetition were necessary to enable him to grasp the horrid truth. "You turned out . . . my lil Susie? Is that it, Missis?"

Mrs. Sutcliffe quailed beneath his stern, set face, and shrank backward into the room. She was entirely unused to the sound of anger. For years she had ruled this house with the terror of her tongue, and even now lashed out at the whisper of restraint.

"The gell's no better than she ought to be," she retorted, hoping by a show of spirit to regain her ascendancy. But her judgment was awry; this last taunt was too much for the old

man. He caught her by the throat, shaking her to and fro in his still powerful grip.

"You lie—you—you wumman! You lie," he shouted. "T'lass is pure as the angels—pure as Gawd's holy angels. It's you—wumman—you who ain't fit to hold a candle to her. Wheer is she gone? Tell me that you—you croakin', squawkin' gospel-puncher. Wheer is she gone?"

In an access of rage he flung her from him and sat down on the bench near the door, trembling like a child.

Mrs. Sutcliffe cowered on the floor. "When thine enemy smiteth thee," she groaned, "turn thou——"

"Have done, wumman! You an' your Bible. Have done!" Sutcliffe shouted as he rose and stood over her. "You've been the curse of my life—the curse of my life—do you hear? For years you've come betwixt me an' peace. Susie is all that's kept me here . . . an' now . . . an' now she's gone. My Gawd! she's gone, an' I go too. Wumman—wumman! do you know what this means to me?"

Mrs. Sutcliffe dragged herself towards him, scared at the novelty of his stern, hard tones.

"George," she moaned; "George, I've tried to do my duty by the gell. I've tried——"

Sutcliffe broke in without remorse.

"It means a little worrud o' four letters, wumman. A worrud you're over fond of slingin' about you. It means Hell—an' nothin' else. Before it was Hell tempered wiv Heaven. Now it's the whole bottomless pit, wiv never a gleam of light. Do you understand? Am I plain, wumman? That is what it means to—to George Sutcliffe."

He stood fingering the latch, ready to go. "She wanted help," he continued; "you give her worruds. She wanted guidance; you give her argiments. She wanted love; you

give her tex's, an' thought I were none the wiser. Lord! Lord! it's a cold, harrd worrld. A crewl worrld, an' I must see about findin' her. My lil' Susie—my lil' Susie."

He lifted the latch. "I think you understan' me," he said, pausing on the threshold. "I think I've put it straight, as the sayin' is?"

Mrs. Sutcliffe made no response. She lay in a heap on the floor, weeping silently.

CHAPTER III

The Search

SUTCLIFFE stepped out into the street and stood looking about him.

Where should he go; how hide the misery gnawing at his vitals; how carry himself erect before the gaping village? How? Thank God, the fog had fallen; the steaming yellow mist was a pillar of cloud to the forlorn old man plodding, with stern eyes, towards the park. Again, where should he go? Which way of all the multitude should he take? In which, of all the teeming townlets, commence his search? There are 70,000 people hereabout; 70,000—think of it, and Susie somewhere hid among them. Pshaw! where should he begin? In Abbeyville—her own village? Chut! foolishness; she would not be there, or the wagging gossips would have brought him news. At his sister's? Impossible—she would have sent him word. At Shornecombe—the little village near which Jack Elliott lived? Absurd, impossible; for that would but give colour to his wife's suspicions. At Riverton, Salcombe, Tunley, any of a score of places up or down the line? Maybe—but where should he begin?

A cart rumbled heavily down the village street behind him. He stood aside to let it pass. A great white miller's waggon emerged from the fog, and four steaming dapple-grey horses, in the full, jingling panoply of burnished harness, drew past. A Riverton cart—no other. Chance decided it. He would go to Riverton. Riverton had police who might help him.

Help him to what? To find Susie? Impossible. He could not tell them she was gone. As soon would he dream of climbing up beside yon vanishing miller, and lay his heart bare—impossible, all impossible.

So he trudged on through the fog, his brain quick with hopes, fears, thoughts, phantasies; quicker than he ever remembered in all the gray misery of those years which had rolled so slowly since Lucy's death. Thus he came to the top of the alley, and struck out down the highroad, going towards Riverton.

"On a job like this, as the sayin' is," he repeated aloud. "On a job like this, I'll walk—an' walk—an' walk. Maybe if I walk long enough, and look, I'll find the lil' lass. Maybe I'll find her so."

Morning saw him still afoot, quietly plodding the streets of Riverton and visiting from house to house. All his acquaintances met him in turn that day. Now he would knock at a door, and entering slowly, would glance around for signs of the lass, and seeing none, would sit down a while to chat in his kindly fashion with the inmates.

"A cold blow, skipper," was the formula did he chance on one of his own sex and calling. "The fog will rise wiv the sun belike—your opinion, skipper? Ah, so I thought—so I thought. Must have been a power of trouble on the river, as the sayin' is, a night like this. Indeed, indeed, you're right. I am well in out of it. Only just in time though. The *Tantalus* is like her skipper—gettin' old, mate; old an' slow. She's not what she was in 'stays,' not by chalks. Can't be sure which way she'll come—like us all, mate; like us all."

At some houses the children would trot out to greet him. Then he was at his best. "What ho! sonny," he would say, "that's the time of day, is it? An' how goes the schoolin' —don't love it? No—ah, there's a brave boy, on to my

knee an' look about you. Now in that pocket of yours —what's in it? Marbles, I'll go bail. An' a top—an' a lump o' chalk. Lumme! I might have known it. We're all alike —fair copies of each other, aren't we, Missis?"

"Eigh! for the day when we were young. No bigger troubles than the lack of apples, sugar an' the like. Happy days, Missis. Eigh! but you should have seen my lil' Susie in those days. When I come home from a voyage, there she is, standin' on top of the sofy—lookin' down the street for daddy. My worrd I was proud those times. Oh! I was proud. Never home wivout some fal-lal for the lil' lass, something bright an' pretty as she'd cotton to, and tuck away wiv her little fists. An' then—on to my foot, ride a cock horse—such a little curly-headed imp. An' the prettiness of her; Lord, the prettiness of her! The pictur' of this lil' thing of yours, the dancin', blue-eyed, merry monkey. Eigh! the prettiness of her—maybe you remember her, Missis?"

"Not very well? Aye, indeed, we're a long way separate now, an' it's expensive travellin'. You haven't set eyes on her some while I'm sure. No? Ah, I might have known it—indeed I might have known it."

After this the conversation always flagged, the old man's face grew grayer and the children ceased to interest him. Then he would seek for an opportunity to escape, and having found it, trudge slowly to the next stopping place; and thus, at length, he came upon some news.

Which friend had told him, he did not know; whether in the street or house, he cared nothing. Someone had seen the lass in Abbeyville. In her own village. It seemed absurd; still, the words had been spoken and to Abbeyville Sutcliffe was going.

The trains were late; all traffic was uncertain by reason of the

fog. The evening was well advanced ere he reached his destination, the village blacksmith's home.

Tony Crow was the village blacksmith; a great and brawny six-footer, with the chest and arms of a Hercules, the limp legs of a Mexican cow-boy, the face of a prize-fighter, and the soul of a little child for innocence.

Tony Crow's wife was the last to see the lil' lass in Abbeyville. So much the old man had gleaned. Now he crossed the muddy road and stood beside the door knocking to gain admittance. This place was not Riverton, and here, he had scant need for secrecy. His question went straight home as he paused on the threshold:

"The Missis has seen my lil' Susie?"

The blacksmith threw wide the door and gripped him by the hand. "Socks!" he cried, "so ah'm hearin'. Missis! it's Cap'n George. Eigh! but you look weary—set dahn, man—set dahn."

"The lil' Lass, Missis," Sutcliffe reiterated turning directly to the wife and ignoring the proferred hospitality.

"Law, Capting, don't look like that. Come in an' rest. I'll tell you all I know."

"Aye, that's good of you, Missis. You see I'm up a bit early—the lass didn't expect me yet; an' there bein' this bother, as the sayin' is, why there it is."

"Law, yes—a course. It's easy to see how the mistake come about. You bein' at sea so much, an' Susie without any sort o' ——"

"But you've seen her, Missis?" Sutcliffe questioned, unheeding her ponderous explanation.

"Tell Cap'n George wheer you see her," cried Tony Crow with boisterous effusion. "Socks! that's what he wants t'be at."

"I'm comin' to it, Tony, surelie. Didn't I tell you all about it, an' Mrs. Slowboy, the passon's wife. You know I did. Capting, I'm comin' through the pawk in the evenin' when I see——"

Sutcliffe stopped her with a gesture.

"Which evening, Missis? Do you happen to know which evening?"

"Was it three days agone, Tony—or four or five days agone?"

"Eigh! the wumman!"

"It must have been a week, Capting. Lawst Friday week as was; for I mind I'm comin' back through the pawk from seein' Mrs. Timses' baby, as is that weak an' pulin' as never was, though the cause ain't hid under a ton o' bricks, as maybe you know, Capting. An' I see someone sittin' on the sea-wall. A gell it was. Your gell, Capting. I know becose I crossed the grass an' spoke to her. 'Waitin' fer someone?' I says. 'No,' she says. 'It's gettin' damp, Susie,' I says. 'I know it,' she says; 'I'm comin' home direckly.'

"I left her then, Capting—an' when I look back through the pawk gates, she's still there, sittin' up agenst the skyline on the sea-wall—an' that's the lawst as anyone see of her."

The skipper's face had fallen. A gray pallor crept over the tan as he listened. He stayed to put one more question.

"You didn't say anythin' else, maybe?"

"Nary a word, Capting. I had no call to."

"Thank you, Missis."

George Sutcliffe moved stiffly towards the door.

"I think I'll be movin' on," he said. "I'm obliged for what you've told me. You see I'll be havin' a letter from her to-morrow. She don't expect me before then. It's useless worryin', on a job like that, as the sayin' is."

"Stay an' have a sup o' grub, Cap'n," said Tony, who was

quite aware of the whole circumstances. "Stay an' have a sup, an' a poipe, there's a man."

But Sutcliffe was already on the steps preparing to resume his search. He turned at the sound of the blacksmith's invitation.

"Nay, I must be movin' on. I've arranged for a place in Riverton, wheer I'm shiftin'. Susie is goin' to live wiv me there. You see, the lil' lass is better eddicated than me . . . an' the wife. She didn't—they didn't ezactly hit it off. I think I've put it straight, Tony, as the sayin' is. I think you understand me—a job like that?"

He closed the door he had held behind him, and moving slowly, came into the road.

"The lil' lass!" he moaned. "The lil' lass—wheer shall I find her?"

Once more he was alone with his misery. Once more the gray fog-blanket wrapped his movements in seclusion. Once more the street echoed to his tread as he headed wearily down the village. He passed the smithy, the beer house at the corner, and came to the pier where he had landed twenty-four hours earlier.

"Eigh! the crewl, hard worrld—the crewl, cold worrld!" The words fell without volition as he searched for a place where he might sit down to think.

The door of the piermaster's sail loft stood ajar. A good room wherein to shelter from the damp, dull fog. The piermaster's retriever lay chained and growling furtively at the entrance.

"Jacob! Jacob—good dog. Lie down, old son. It's me—it's me." He passed in quietly, the dog wagging an effusive welcome. He sat down to think.

"That string's broke," he whispered, leaning forward with

his hands about the dog's neck. "Eh, Jacob, old boy, the old man's weary—weary of life. The lil' lass—my lil' Susie, as used to tuck her little fists about your neck, Jacob—she's gone, an' Gawd alone knows where to find her."

Sutcliffe's head sank low on his arms, the dog moaned in sympathy; then the piermaster came to close the door, and silence reigned unbroken.

CHAPTER IV

Saunderson Plays a Trump

AGAIN a solitary figure plodding the quiet roads and tortuous lanes. Another day. Muggy skies, steaming hedgerows, dripping trees, mud, slush—image, the country Swinfleet way.

A silent figure, somewhat bent, clad in dark blue cloth and peaked blue cap; with straggly, curled ringlets hanging about his ears; gray, thin, identical on either side, a cleanshaven face. A man with shining, scarred visage, the colour of new mahogany; a firm, set mouth and sad, gray-blue eyes—image, an old-school Thames skipper. George Sutcliffe.

Sutcliffe on the third day of his wanderings now approaching Swinfleet with Susie's belated letter in his pocket. He might have taken train; but to do so he must have waited an hour or more. He had grown accustomed to walking and preferred it. He was alone thus. The other way meant clacking tongues; questions, answers, misery.

Everyone knew this business; only he denied it. Susie was missing; his wife had turned her out; now he sought her. The people, the poor people, looked and said, "Aye, it's easy seen there's been a mistake—the lass is safe no doubt." Their sympathy hurt him. The girl was missing; he knew they knew it, but persisted in his silent course working out the problem in his own dull fashion.

Now all that was past. Susie was with her aunt at Swinfleet and he was going to meet her. Mud, slush, puddled cart ruts;

unholy stones waiting to be ground into mother earth; a shower of drops from the trees—"Eh, a breeze comin' up. Lawd send a clearance of the weather."

He plodded on, his eyes bent on the ground; his garments splashed and foul; his coat wet, the gray ringlets dripping moisture. Hark! A cart approached, tearing through the mud with the squirm and splutter of a torpedo boat on the measured mile. He glanced around. A cart from Abbeyville—Saunderson the driver.

"What ho! skipper. Lumme! but this is wonderful luck." The horse was almost on its haunches with the energy of Saunderson's check. Sutcliffe lifted his bent back and looked at the big man making room for him to mount.

"Aye," he said, "maybe it's luck—maybe it's not, a job like that. No, I'll not get up—I'd rather walk."

Saunderson did not urge the point. He dismounted instead, and, throwing the reins over his arm, moved on beside the cart.

"I heard you were out here," he said, "wiv Susie—an' so I made the best of my way to see you. How's the lass?"

Sutcliffe paused. His companion immediately brought the horse to a standstill, and the two men faced each other.

"That's not what you want with me," Sutcliffe remarked. "Speak out—man to man. What is it you do want?"

"You know what it is I'm after—you know as well as I do that it's Susie I want. I've asked you to help me gain her—I've done many things for you, an' I look for some sort of kindness in return. Man," he continued, his deep voice rolling in the quiet lane, "can't you see I love her? Can't you see I would give my soul case to have her—do you want me to put it all in writin'—am I to be forever on the beg——"

Sutcliffe drew himself stiffly upright. He lifted his hand for silence. "I look for nothing," he said, "only that Susie shall

wed who she loves. If she loves you, then I give her to you; without that I will never give you my help."

"It's a dangerous game you're playin'," Saunderson argued, his anger rising. "I could double you up easy as crackin' eggs. I could turn you into the gutter. If I wished I could put a light to the old house down by the river an' burn every stick. You couldn't touch me. It's mine—mine. Bought an' paid for in hard-earned gold, wiv the savin's of years, you understand?"

But Sutcliffe did not quail. His thin lips became a trifle more compressed, his eyes took a colder gleam. "Aye," he said, "you could do that."

"But I don't want to do it. Lumme! d'you think I'm yearnin' to botch my hand? I love Susie—an' I look for your help."

"Her mother tried to help you—didn't seem to come off though," Sutcliffe sneered.

"Her mother's a fool," Saunderson retorted. "She's got no tact. Look here, George, I don't wish to quarrel wiv you—it isn't sense. Stand aside an' don't interfere. Give me the chance I want, an' you'll find me gentle as a kid. Is it a bargain?"

"Nay, I can make no bargains, on a job like that. It's my lil' Susie that has to be consulted, not me. But I don't mind telling you, that if you win her I shall be surprised. Susie isn't a changeable sort; you know she's pledged to Elliott—you know it as well as I do."

Saunderson stood a moment in thought; his eyes fixed on the old man's face.

"Aye," he said, "so I've heard. Well—I must be gettin' back."

"You take it as I mean?" Sutcliffe questioned. "You understand I wouldn't force her?"

"Yes, I understand."

"Then there's nothing more to be said?"

"No; it don't seem like it." Saunderson fumbled in his pocket, staring at the steaming horse as though he expected that weary animal could help him with his subject. Then again his glance rested on Sutcliffe.

"You've come from Riverton—I s'pose you've heard the news?" he blurted.

"About Dunscombe?"

"No—Elliott."

Sutcliffe's eyes fell. He looked about him in wistful supplication.

"I know nothing," he said, "'cept that the lass was driven from her home. What about him?"

"They are searchin' for him down yonder in the town. They say he had a hand—in Dunscombe's murder."

"They say what?"

The question rang in a new tone as Sutcliffe stepped nearer. Saunderson repeated the gossip, adding:

"I know nothin'. I tell you what is said down Riverton way—aye, an' in Abbeyville, too, for that matter. But I tell you more. They won't find him. They will never find him, not if they look till Kingdom come."

"What do you mean? Speak straight man—speak straight."

"It's a thing I always do, George Sutcliffe. But sometimes it's wise to—hedge a bit, as you might say—'specially when you're speakin' to the father of the gell he was goin' to marry. It might ease the shock, you see."

Sutcliffe made a gesture of impatience. "Go on," he cried, "go on."

"I was down at the pier this mornin'," Saunderson resumed. "They had a boat there—cut in half. It was the boat Jack

Elliott borrowed when he ran from the hounds. There was a coat tucked under the thwart—Jack Elliott's coat; an' in it was a letter. I have it here. Maybe you'll know the writin'."

He held a crumpled, water-stained note towards his companion. "Steady!" he said. "I've broke it to you. There's no comfort to be got out of it. Jack Elliott's down the cellar."

Sutcliffe gripped at the shaft and remained speechless. Saunderson watched him in despair until he opened the envelope; then again he searched his face, but the old man only swayed to and fro like one on the verge of suffocation. The letter was Susie's. It was addressed to Elliott—now Elliott was dead. Sutcliffe glanced up, a pathetic figure, shrunken, weary of battle, full of the anguish of years. He opened his lips to speak—yet the words said nothing of his torture: "The lil' lass," he whispered. "Gawd help the lil' lass."

"I brought it to you," Saunderson explained, "because it seemed best for you to break it. George, you are the only one that can break it. If I could help, I'd do it willin'—but I can't, I can't."

Sutcliffe made no response for some minutes, then he extended his hand: "I believe you," he said. "Eigh! the lil' lass."

Saunderson made no effort to continue the conversation; he grasped the proffered hand, remounted his cart, gathered up the reins and drove off towards Riverton. The old man passed on at once, murmuring as he went: "Eigh! the lil' lass! Terr'ble, terr'ble—the crewl, hard worrld."

In half an hour he had arrived at the small latticed gate Elliott had so recently left. His sister, hearing footsteps, came to the porch and looked out. She advanced down the path to meet him.

"George!" she cried. "Oh, I'm glad to see you, brother. Indeed, I'm glad to see you."

Sutcliffe stumbled miserably on the steps. His hand strayed aimlessly to meet hers: "How is she?" he whispered.

"Shockin', shockin'. Never a smile since that night; scarce a word—an' when me an' Tom come in, she's lyin' on the floor like the dead."

"Wheer is she, sister?"

"Upstairs—sittin' in the winda, starin' at the trees."

"Take me up. I want to see her."

"Nay, I'll call her down. Maybe it'll rouse her. Make her cry, George—there's nothin' like a cry for cheerin' one up. It will do her more good than all the med'cins in the pharmacy."

She bustled to the foot of the stairs; ascended noisily and opened the girl's door. Sutcliffe took off his cap and stood looking into the crown.

"Carey's wheer I bought it," he remarked inconsequently; "eighteen pence is what it cost." He hung it carefully against the wall where no peg was. The cap slipped to the floor. "Lumme!" he whispered, glancing around, "I'm goin' blind on a job like that."

The jubilant voice of his sister sounded on the staircase as he entered the kitchen. A moment later Mrs. Surridge followed with her arm about the girl's waist.

"There you are," she cried: "Father's come to see you. Go an' talk, my pretty—there's nothin' like talk for cheerin' one up—'cept maybe a cry." The latter was an afterthought as she closed the door upon them.

The girl entered with a stoney gaze that cut Sutcliffe to the heart. He moved forward to meet her.

"My lil' Susie," he whispered. "My lil' Susie."

Then, almost before the words had died, she lay in his arms, her face pillowed on his breast, sobbing pitifully.

Late that night when all the household was in bed, Sutcliffe paced the room as he would have paced the deck of his vessel on a stormy night; but with a different species of trouble chasing sleep from his eyes. He had heard of Dunscombe's death, but had not stayed to investigate the matter as others had. The news Saunderson had given him, coupled with Susie's pale face and altered manner, struck him a double blow.

The old man quailed before the miserable sequence of events. His thoughts wandered from one anguish to another—Susie's flight, the difficulty with his wife and Saunderson, Dunscombe's murder, and the rumours of Elliott's guilt, his flight and death. Sutcliffe was growing impervious to further torture; he could only moan dumbly like an overwhipped slave at the triangles. And so, as the dawn peeped in, it found him standing near the diamond-paned lattice, holding something aloft and stroking it tenderly.

"To think it's come to this," he murmured. "Eigh! such a bright lil' lass—always ready to meet her father an' tuck away the fal-lals he brought her. Such a lil' sunbeam. Eigh! the crewl, hard worrld. Strick down just when the old man wanted her most. Gawd's hand, sir? Aye—so I've heard, so I've heard; but, beggin' to differ, I'm not wiv you—on a job like that."

It was a long lock of the girl's bright hair, a piece cut years ago that he was fondling in the growing light.

CHAPTER V

Sutcliffe Seeks a Reply

A MAN'S action is never complete in itself. It does not die even if he dies of its effect. A man may cut his throat—well, there remain results, ramifications passing all comprehension, to others.

To put it plainly, some one must attend the inquest and see to the funeral; some one must wind up the estate, if by chance there be an estate, and if there be none, some one may be compelled to adopt the children—and as a side issue, it may not be convenient for some one. We can scarcely place any limit to the possibilities in such a case, but we may be very sure that we who are left must attend the reckoning. So in this matter of Susie and Jack.

Elliott had acted from a very complete recognition of the situation as it faced him in a moment of scare. He had taken a definite line of action after consideration of those other actions which had so complicated matters, and he had started across the water to solemnise as speedily as possible a marriage already consummated. He had acted from the highest motives—but for some reason it was Susie who would presently have to pay.

"Heaven never helps the man who will not act," Sophocles tells us, and to that dictum one may be permitted to add, and it seldom helps those who do.

We always pay. In blood, in tears, in some sort we are compelled to pay, and we can either stand aside and take it smiling, or we can put on the gloves and bend for fighting. At

present Susie knew nothing of either necessity—but it was at hand.

It banged on the door one afternoon while the family were discussing the ramifications. Mrs. Surridge had views on the subject, but she also had convictions as to the personality behind a commonplace rat-a-plan. She immediately sprang from her chair: "That's a quality knock," she announced· "sakes alive! how's my collar?"

Sutcliffe examined the articles in question with a critical eye and shook his head: "It's not so clean as it were," he said "but it'll pass."

But by this time Mrs. Surridge had returned from a peeping expedition to the small window in the passage and stood on tiptoe before the glass of an American clock ticking gamely on the mantelshelf.

"You're worse than Tom, George, an' that's the truth. You open the door while I get straight. It's the parson come over to interfere. I don't hold with interferin' in family matters. Take him into the parlour an' talk till I'm ready."

Sutcliffe obeyed, but Surridge made use of the opportunity to escape, and it devolved on the skipper to do the honours. Mr. Oakley being admitted presently found himself installed in a most treacherous chair and Sutcliffe, seated on the extreme edge of another, confronting him. The vicar regarded this phenomenon, gravely, over raised finger tips spread like an inverted V beneath his chin. He seemed to be taking the man in as from one situated at an immense distance. It was a position crying to the cartoonist for pencil and sketch block. But Mr. Oakley had no humour. He was a serious man, thin and ascetic, with black hair, large nose, and no chin—one of those persons with whom nature has dealt unfairly and who deals in commonplace as a result.

Mrs. Surridge had no opinion of his perspicacity. She questioned how any one could know anything of struggles and poverty "when he lives in a blessed man-sion an' has five maids to attend his wants beside a fat buttons an' a long-jawed coachman." His wife, too, troubled Mrs. Surridge more than she would readily express. It seemed that "she got on her nervous system," though how she effected that feat was not apparent.

On this occasion Mrs. Surridge entered the room like a gust of wind, and the door snapped behind her. The collar and apron she wore bristled with a perfect battery of turrets and angles. She appeared as though about to make an onslaught on the thin, black-coated form seated there in fear of a breakdown, but she only extended her hand and said:

"La! to think it was you, Mr. Oakley," and after a moment's pause: "I hope you will excuse me for keepin' you waitin'—but being single-handed one is apt to get caught, as you yourself may know."

The vicar smiled.

"Indeed I do," he said, "such things often happen, but we become used to them—as, with God's help, we become used to even greater troubles."

Mrs. Surridge sat down and folded her hands across the battery. Her society manner was a quaint mixture of reticence and boldness. When speaking to her social superior her tongue had a knack of finding h's where none exist—although at other times she rarely made a blunder with the aspirate. But now she was obviously at a disadvantage. There was a queer tightening at the corner of her mouth and a sparkle in her eyes which told of an attempt at restraint to which Mrs. Surridge was almost a stranger.

"Hindeed, sir," she replied, "has we get older we do."

"That is not a kind remark," said the vicar from his immeasurable distance, "still, we will not retaliate—for, as far as I am concerned, it is more or less true."

Mrs. Surridge smoothed her lap and tried to make amends by becoming conversational. "The weather's perfeckly awful," she announced, "an' Tom's got a litter of young pigs hout in the yard. They come Monday week, most tryin', at twelve o'clock hat night. It's not often hi see Tom put out, but them pigs fair made him ache."

The vicar regarded the incident as trivial. He knew nothing of pigs and was concerned with a much deeper problem, to wit, the rumours current in Abbeyville. He looked up with a sigh and said: "Yes, the winter seems to be setting in early. These are the equinoctials, I suppose—eh, Sutcliffe?"

The old man recognised that the question was addressed to him. "Maybe that's what it is, sir," he said, "but they be main damp and muggy."

"Old Moore's what hi call a prophet," Mrs. Surridge interjected at this; "'some gales an' much rain,' is what he puts down for the month—an' we've had 'em. But there's worse to come: 'A crown-ed head will be taken next month an' the level-ooshionary movement his to be follad by dire heffects for the capat'lists,' come October."

"Nonsense, nonsense, Mrs. Surridge!" the vicar objected, but without a smile. "No one has power to foretell these or any events. It is the veriest mockery and should be suppressed."

But the battery remained undisturbed.

"Last month," it asserted breathlessly, "he had 'trouble in the hager-i-cultoral districts an' scarcity o' fodder.' Consequency is, Farmer Thompson's killed 'is beasts for want of pasture, an' Tom's struggles to keep the guv'nor's sheep, an'

the trouble with our hown fowls *an'* pigs was bringin' him to a shadda. If that ain't proof hi don't know what is."

Mrs. Surridge paused and smoothed the battery with both hands, but the vicar perceived his opportunity and stepped along at his ease.

"I came," he said, "to speak on a different question—a very delicate question, if I may so express it."

"Hi knew it," said Mrs. Surridge, and sat back defiant in her chair.

"There are some ugly rumours in Abbeyville," he proceeded, and paused.

"There al-ways is rumours hin a village," said Mrs. Surridge.

"But these seem possible. I am sorry to say it—but so it is."

"They al-ways is probable—else what's the good of passin' 'em along?"

"They say," the vicar proceeded, "that Susie has——"

"Hi don't think we need henter into that, eh, brother?" Mrs. Surridge snapped, glancing at Sutcliffe for confirmation.

"No need at all. Susie were driven from home by my wife—an' Susie's here," he replied tersely.

"But, if you prevent me taking the only steps I can to clear the girl's character—don't you see that you injure her and give impetus to the rumour itself. In justice to Susie you should ——"

"The whole thing's a lie," Sutcliffe broke out with sudden passion, "a lie put about by my wife for her own ends. I don't know what those ends are. I don't ask. I only know it's a lie an' I won't have Susie worried to answer."

To Sutcliffe the suggestion of refutation was equivalent, perhaps, to admission. He had additionally the poor man's sense of distrust in justice, and took the opportunity of expressing it.

"I suppose," said the vicar, from that immense distance which

yawned between them, "I suppose you understand that if this is not refuted—sorry as I shall be personally—Susie must give up her position at the schools?"

"That I understand."

"And you won't prevent it—you won't aid me to clear her ——"

"There is nothing to clear," said Sutcliffe. But the tone said more than the words.

Mr. Oakley seemed to recognise this, for he turned to Mrs. Surridge with a deprecatory inflection:

"Believe me," he said. "I have no wish to press this matter unduly. It was for Susie's sake I spoke. I have known her so long—and now everything must end. Her school life, her study, her salary—it is the greatest pity—the greatest pity." He rose and stood leaning against the mantelpiece, a gaunt figure in black with narrow eyes and a preposterous nose. He looked down upon Mrs. Surridge sitting so ill at ease at his feet and marked her labouring breath and air of determination. "I hoped," he said, "to get you to help me, Mrs. Surridge, but it seems impossible."

"Quite impossible," came from the pursed lips. "Quite."

"And in the other matter?"

"I don't know what hit is."

"I wish to persuade your brother to go back to his wife—will you aid me in this?"

"I'd as lief not, Mr. Oakley. Capting Sutcliffe his the best judge of his own affairs."

Mrs. Surridge was on surer ground here. The battery became more regular in its movements, the lips took a less rigorous line. "In a gen'ral way," she went on in explanation of her position, "I don't holt with a man leavin' his wife or contrairiwise—not so long as they are what you might call hevenly

matched. But when one or the other has the temper of a washerwoman hon a wet day—it's better to part an' have done with it."

"Whom God hath joined together, let no man put asunder," said the vicar solemnly. But he sighed at the dictum.

Mrs. Surridge flicked the notion to the winds, for she knew her brother's wife both before and after marriage.

"In a gen'ral way, that's true, sir," she admitted, "but what had the Lord to do with Mary Wyatt marryin' Capting Sutcliffe?"

"Mrs. Surridge, I think you go farther than you intend. I think you——"

"Not hi," said the lady, and proceeded to hammer the why. "Didn't she just hogle her way into my brother's defections? Who set her on to that, sir? Pride and laziness—nothin' else."

"Not quite as bad as that, sister," Sutcliffe remarked in his slow fashion, the heat all vanished with the new topic. "I ask her, you mind."

"A course you did. What else could you expect? Why, if a woman sets her heart on a man's home he's done—he've got to ask her."

"Still," the vicar persisted, "that is no reason why your brother should throw her off. It may be an easy method of ridding one's self of an unpleasant companion; but it is against God's law. Only a certain section of the community permit it or condone it. Depend upon it no man can offend the law with impunity. It will have fruit, Sutcliffe, it will have fruit."

The old man moved restlessly in his chair. He gripped at the horsehair cover, sitting balanced on the extreme edge. "Sir," he said, "I'm not good at arguments. I know very little about anythin' bar ships an' the fag-ends of ship owners,

but I put it this way—two people can't run one ship—oetween 'em they will put her on the rocks; an' two people can't pull opposite ways at a gell's strings wi'out harming the gell. That I know. I left my wife. Right. Why did I leave her?—because we pulled opposite ways. Because she never behaved square to the lass. Because of what happened the other night.

"Sir, " he went on with grim suggestion of the thing as it appeared to him, "is it a mother's duty to force a gell into the streets? Is that what I'm to expect of my wife while I'm afloat? Sir, it's impossible. I'll never go back."

"A man's a man, sir," Mrs. Surridge interposed as her brother drew breath, "he's not a hen to he plucked an' worrited till he's got no feathers to heft."

The vicar looked up with a pained expression. He was baffled by the vigour of the defence. "I hoped to induce you to side with me," he said, "but I confess I see no chance of it. I must leave the matter to your brother's conscience."

"My brother's conscience will, I hope, be found flavoured with reason," she returned as the battery showed further signs of agitation. "Why—hif I treated Tom as that woman has treated Captain Sutcliffe, I should expect to find myself spread out to keep the top of a pigsty warm—an' small blame to Tom for chuckin' me."

The vicar smiled. The difficulty of "chucking" Mrs. Surridge was so obvious that even the gravity of his cause disappeared at the suggestion; for Tom was a small man and his wife as one of the daughters of Anak. He moved towards the door under the new influence.

"Well, well," he cried, "I must leave it. I am sorry, for I wished to help you and to help Susie—but it seems impossible." He paused hat in hand. And about the banns?" he questioned.

"Banns!" Sutcliffe interjected, "what banns?"

"Susie's."

Sutcliffe started to his feet. "Susie's banns?" he cried. "Do you mean the lass had arranged——"

Mrs. Surridge interposed with a quiet glance. "I should have told you, brother," she said, "I meant to tell you—but the gell bein' so queer an' everythin' so hurried, clean put it out of my head. Before she were driven out it was arranged that they should be hasked. Susie was to have been wed some time after you came home—if so be you had no subjections—but bein' driven out Elliott wanted to take her to Riverton——"

"Elliott!"

Sutcliffe swayed unsteadily before them. He stood with outstretched hands, his lips moving, the words falling in gusty sentences, uneven, broken: "My head's turnin' . . . my head's gone . . . dull an' stoopid, like my life . . . a job like that! My Susie's banns up—an' wiv Elliott! Lord! go easy on the lass."

The vicar approached. He seemed at that moment to arrive, as it were, in the same plane. He placed one hand on the old man's shoulder, touching him gently. "Steady, my friend," he whispered. "God will comfort you if you ask him."

Sutcliffe faced about with sudden scorn. "Aye," he said, "so I've heerd. So I've heerd."

Mr. Oakley refused to take offence. "What is it?" he questioned.

"It's this," said the old man. "Elliott's down the cellar."

"You mean he is drowned?" the clergyman asked, uncertain of the metaphor, and very pale.

"Aye, sir—drowned, drowned. P'raps cut in half. God knows—a job like that. Gone where many a good man's gone, an' Susie'll have to pay."

"Then surely you will let me do what I can to clear her name —surely in face of this——"

"Clear her name?"

"Unless that is done her life at the schools must end. Don't you see it, Sutcliffe? Isn't it plain?"

"Do you think there's anythin' to clear—does it strike you so? You know her."

"As far as I am concerned—no. But I have managers to consider and the welfare of the schools. I——"

"An' my Susie is like to harm it?"

The vicar waved his hand. "The world," he announced, "is very censorious; we cannot afford to offend it. Certain matters require——"

"Then damn the world," Sutcliffe broke out.

"If you persist in talking in that fashion, I must go," said the clergyman.

"How else am I to talk? You tell me Susie must clear her character—clear it when it's snow! You tell me Susie's banns are up. I tell you Elliott's charged wiv killin' Dunscombe, that he's run—an' is down the cellar. You tell me Gawd will comfort me—an' you throw Susie out as though she's—as though," he broke off, fumbling for words, "as though you are Gawd Almighty, an' can judge——"

"That is blasphemy, Sutcliffe," said the vicar sternly. "I will not hear it."

"Beggin' to differ, sir," the old man interrupted, "I'm not wiv you, on a job like that. How it will be looked upon when they come to the open book, I can't say. But I don't think it will be chalked up against me, as the sayin' is."

Mr. Oakley moved toward the door, his face very white and pained. "I am sorry," he said, "I hoped to be able to aid you and to aid the girl; but——"

"Just so—but?" said the old man.

"I can do no more."

"More can't I."

They made no attempt to stay his exit and he passed from the house wearing still the pained expression which had dawned at Sutcliffe's outbreak.

Mrs. Surridge viewed his exit with distinct pleasure. "Thank goodness for that," she remarked after closing the door. "Now we can mend the china with our own cement."

Sutcliffe made no response. He stood looking out through the window at the sodden landscape. From the fields where Tom Surridge worked, came the hum of a threshing machine and the steady drone of an engine. Plover whirled and screamed in a newly ploughed field, searching the ruts for food until the crack of a distant rifle scared them and they hurried in a covey up wind.

Mrs. Surridge advanced and laid her hand on his arm.

"What about this Elliott, George," she questioned, "is it true?"

"Aye, sister—it's true enough."

"Then she'll have to be told."

"Leave it to me," he returned. "Maybe she'll take it better from the old man—a job like that."

CHAPTER VI

The Difficulty of Belief

BUT Sutcliffe did not speak. The days passed on and he saw Susie so obviously waiting for news that he could not bring himself to drive hope from her. There was no knowing, he decided, in a case of this kind. The lad may be down the cellar, but we have no proof—only guesswork and the talk of folk down river way. Sutcliffe appraised this at its full value—and found it unwise to express an opinion.

In his heart he prayed that it might be so. The Coroner's verdict stood as a bar against marriage. He argued that Susie might get over death by drowning, but death by the rope, which seemed possible, was death and damnation rolled in one. No girl could hope to make headway against it.

So Sutcliffe sailed without having spoken, and Susie sat down to watch and wait in the chilling silence which had come upon her since Jack had disappeared.

She had visited Riverton twice and on each occasion had returned with a passivity of manner which completely nonplussed Mrs. Surridge; a passivity which curiously wore off as the days went by. To-day it had been arranged that she was to go once more to Riverton, and Mrs. Surridge saw that she smiled at breakfast. She noted, too, the sunniness of eyes which once had been always sunny.

Life at eighteen cannot forever be sombre, nor can it long remain tearful. Youth is strong. One is not overwhelmed at the first blow, nor perhaps, by the second. Hope climbs

amidst the black clouds which surround us. The silver lining of which we are always prattling lies somewhere behind. Indubitably this must be so. Something will happen. Nothing can be blacker than the present—besides, when you think of it, are we not all children of circumstance who manage more or less adroitly to adapt ourselves to the conditions in which we move? If this were not so then to-morrow half the world would be on its deathbed, unable to face the peril with which it is surrounded.

The day was brilliant. September had gone out with the roar of a lion and sunny October had stepped down to beguile the birds into the belief that spring was again at hand. The air rang with countless songsters. The rooks, awakened from their lethargy, winged heavily to and fro the elms carrying twigs and pieces of down. But the trees belied what the birds proclaimed so noisily; for the long, hot summer had left the leaves no nourishment. The autumn colouring did not appear. The leaves fell, sere and withered, like old men at the end of a difficult battle with life.

And so it came about, that when Tom Surridge made his entry with the trap, Susie looked so bright that even Mrs. Surridge was deceived. She decided that things were moving in the right direction. Apparently they were—for the two started in great spirits and the few short miles seemed as twenty to the girl's impetuosity.

She told herself that to-day there would be letters. To-day it was impossible that she could be disappointed. To-day—well, if——She brushed the notion aside and, as they clattered down High Street, persuaded her uncle to allow her to walk. She desired to be alone at the post office—alone with her letters.

Susie moved briskly towards her goal, hope prancing beside her. She came to the steps, entered the swinging doors and

stood once more at the long counter watching. The demeanour of the clerks was nonchalant with those other applicants. She wondered whether they guessed the importance of letters, whether they would recognise the importance at all events of hers. But they did not guess. They saw a bright and flushed face, dancing eyes, and beautiful hair—a pretty girl in point of fact, asking for letters. Everyone desires letters. All humanity is agreed on this question in the abstract gaze of a post office official. They require, simply letters. The man stared at her through the grille.

"What name?"

"Sutcliffe—Susie Sutcliffe."

The clerk turned out a bundle and examined them swiftly; "Sutcliffe? No, nothing for you."

Then hope died.

The girl swayed at the counter and became white to the tips of her ears. She had relied on receiving news. Jack must have written. What could be the reason of this silence? What must she do? The look of concern on the clerk's face gave her strength. She looked up to whisper: "Are you sure?"

"I will look again."

He did so. Susie watching with terrible earnestness until he had finished, saw him again glance up and his lips form the words: "No, there are none at present."

Still she watched him. Her brain was dizzy. The office furniture seemed to be moving before her eyes. Someone on the left was laughing—over in the corner a man was coming out of the telephone box. He was shutting the door with an air of absurd importance. It came into Susie's mind that she was on the verge of laughter, then she caught the clerk's gaze and it steadied her. It seemed that she must say some-

thing, that the situation demanded it. And again came a whispered question:

"This is the General, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"How long do you keep letters that are addressed 'to be called for?' "

"A month, perhaps more. It depends."

"And then?"

"We send them to the dead letter office to be returned."

The girl was so white, so still, and yet so beautiful, that the man went out of his way to give further information. He turned up a register and examined it, asking further particulars as he searched:

"When did you expect your letter? Any time this or last week —hum. No; I'm sorry to disappoint you. We have returned no letter in the interval you name."

Thus it was over. The hope-conjured silver lining sank through space. Nothing remained but clouds—clouds brim full of angry mutterings; charged with despair and a curious medley of belief, disbelief, anger, trust, love, wonder.

Where should she go? It mattered little where she went—Jack had forgotten to write. What should she do? It was immaterial what she did—Jack had not kept his promise; he had forgotten her position, forgotten the stigma of disgrace that had fallen upon her—forgotten . . . forgotten . . . and she was——

Susie crept wistfully into the sunshine. The air revived her. She laughed a little; breathed more freely; but how changed, how cold the world appeared! The wind was chill, the streets bleak; the passers on the pavement unduly boisterous. She shivered, than drawing her cloak about her, went back to meet her uncle.

She was standing at the appointed place, gazing absently at the shops, when a man approached. She knew the step and tried ineffectually to draw apart; but something chained her to the spot; a lethargy, a reluctance, a passive immobility she could not overcome. She was powerless to make the necessary effort, and, on turning, saw Saunderson watching intently all her movements.

She met his glance with the tired air of one who has not strength for dispute. She wished he would go away, and leave her in peace. She recoiled from the thought of speech with any one at this moment; yet, despite her reluctance, felt irresistibly drawn towards him. He reached out and took her hand.

"Susie," he whispered, "I'm glad to see you again. What are you doin' in Riverton?"

She replied with strange promptitude: "Waiting for Uncle —he is to drive me back," and as she spoke she wondered whether Jack could by any chance hear her voice.

Saunderson's eyes were fixed upon her, reading her face, searching for the signals he hoped to find; but he said:

"You look ill: aren't you well, Lass?"

"Yes—I am quite well."

"Take care of yourself, Susie. You are not strong—may I stay till Uncle comes?"

She looked up with a little shiver of dread. "If you wish to," she replied.

"If I wish to! Susie, you know I wish to. You know I would never leave you—if you gave me the right to stay by." Then after a pause, and as the girl made no response. "When are you comin' back to Abbeyville. The place is fair stale wivout you."

The man spoke with an intensity that was strange consider-

ing their relations. It was a risky question; but Susie did not notice it. She was concerned with the indefiniteness of her knowledge about Jack—Jack, who had promised to write, who had promised to call her to him and rivet that marriage which had been so strangely interrupted—Jack, who had forgotten . . . forgotten.

She had fallen again into the apathy which had marked her attitude on those days following her lover's departure, before her father had arrived.

"I shall never return to Abbeyville," she answered at length, speaking like a child who has learned a lesson but does not understand its application.

"There are worse places than Abbeyville to live in, Susie."

"Perhaps."

"Then why not come back. I might be able to help you if you gave me the chance—the right. Why don't you come back?"

Susie stood fidgetting with her cloak. The weight oppressed her; she buttoned and unbuttoned the fastenings; then she looked up: "Oh, because I'm a girl, I suppose. Only men can do as they will."

Saunderson breathed hard. He touched the restless hand and she became still.

"Give me the chance," he whispered, "give me the chance to guard you; then you may go, an' do what you will."

"Do you mean that?"

"You know I do. Susie, you know I mean it."

She did not see his face; she was staring down the street, marking the throng and bustle of the busy world; noting the haste, the rush, and purpose on the people's faces, and wondering whether they knew that Jack had forgotten to write; whether they would care if they did know; whether it would

make them sympathetic or disdainful. Then she became aware that Saunderson was still watching, and she spoke:

"Nonsense," she said, "you only think you mean it."

"Susie, before God I——"

"That is the way with men, before marriage," she interrupted, with a touch of scorn.

"Susie—hear me——"

"But afterwards," she resumed with steady apathy, "afterwards, they forget. They are all alike in that. They forget."

Saunderson tried to take her hand, but the noise of approaching wheels had attracted her attention. She saw her uncle driving up the street, and in a moment had turned to meet him.

"Law! Susie!" cried the little man, as he jumped to the pavement, "how white you are to be sure. You've done too much walking. I shouldn't a let you."

She looked up cheerily: "Thanks, I am all right. I can rest on the way back. Besides, what does it matter?"

Surridge watched her in mute astonishment.

"What the old woman, your auntie, my dear, will say if she sees you like that, Law only knows," said Tom with conviction. "I shouldn't have allowed it. Why!" he continued, as he reached forward to gather up the reins, "if that ain't Jim Saunderson."

"Drive on," Susie cried sharply, "I am tired."

Surridge stared, then waving his hand he turned the horse towards home.

"Were you speakin' to him, Susie?"

"He came up. I—I couldn't get away," she stammered.

Tom noted the tell-tale face with a quiet chuckle.

"Law!" he said, "why should you? There's no harm in a

gell speakin' to a man. 'Sides, he's a fine-built chap, so Auntie says, an' has been won'erful good to father."

"What do you mean?"

The question rang so suddenly that Tom gave the mare an unnecessary flick which sent her spinning resentfully onward, faster than was wise in the streets.

"What do I mean?" he cried between vigorous "Whoahs." and "Steady there," and a judicious tightening of the reins. "Why, bless the gell, what do it sound like?"

"I always thought," Susie returned, "that father disliked Saunderson."

"Not more than I do, Susie. Woah then! Gently does it, or we shall have you all of a lather—Susie," Tom went on, a curious dread depicted on his face, as it suddenly dawned upon him that he was breaking one of his wife's most particular injunctions, "I'm all adrift. P'raps I'm wrong also—it was someone at Abbeyville, an' his name began with a S. We'll say no more about it."

Susie made no further remark. She understood the niceties of the position, for Tom Surridge was a small, meek man, and his wife, as all Swinfleet knew, was much larger. It was easy to see that he had blundered, though why she was being kept in ignorance, was beyond her comprehension at this moment. She was concerned much more with the ineffaceable fact that Jack had forgotten to write, that Jack, with her kisses on his face, the remembrance of her passionate appeal to be taken with him ringing in his ears, that Jack had forgotten. Or, had he forgotten? Had something happened? Was there any truth in the report that he was in love with that girl? She pushed the suggestion from her. It was impossible. He might have forgotten to write, but the other was absurd. She decided that it would be better to wait. It came into her

mind, too, that she might question her father on his return about Saunderson—and Jack.

Late that evening, while they were all sitting around the fire after supper, Tom left his place and went out to see to the pigs and poultry before shutting the house for the night. When they were alone, Mrs. Surridge turned to the girl and said:

"So you saw Jim Saunderson in town to-day?"

Susie replied in the affirmative, but evinced no desire to continue the conversation.

"A fine built chap, that," Mrs. Surridge expatiated, "a perfeck galliator, Susie. I wouldn't be surprised if he finds it lonesome at Abbeyville now somebody's away?"

"Men," the girl averred with a scarcely veiled sneer, "have the knack of adapting themselves to circumstances. New faces are always an attraction."

Mrs. Surridge came over and put her arms about the girl's neck. "Then don't you think we might take a leaf out of their book?" she questioned.

Susie sat in silence, her lips closed, her eyes concentrated on the glowing fire. But she saw nothing more pertinent than the figure of a man moving down the river in a boat; passing the piers, passing the shipping, and rowing, always rowing out into the distant fog. Some sparks shot out across the hearth the coal sank in the grate; then Mrs. Surridge's voice fell upon her ears again. "That's letters for someone," she was saying. "Leastways, it used to be letters in my time, I remember."

Susie looked up with a sudden question. "Don't you think it means that the night is getting frosty?"

"La! what a material thing it is," Mrs. Surridge droned, "with no more seltiment about it than a whipped babby. Why, Susie, when I was your age, sparks fleckin' out of the fire set

me thinkin' an' dreamin' by the hour. If it didn't mean letters from one, it meant letters from another. Off with the old love, on with the new, Susie. That was my motta, an' I kept the lads dancin', I warrant. Why, if you can't make 'em dance before you're wed, you may be sure you'll stand precious little chance after."

Susie remained quite still. In her mind there moved a curious medley of boats and ships and dancing mannikins. Something appealed to her risible faculties and she smiled; then again instantly fell into the old calm attitude of waiting. Mrs. Surridge sat back in her chair watching the pale, set face. She knew from Susie's remarks some time since, that she expected to hear from Jack, and knew from her husband of the changed tone when he again picked her up in Riverton. She drew her own conclusions, but like many a kindly chatterer, desired to know definitely whether there had been any news. For, as Sutcliffe said, "one never can swear a man's down the cellar until the body's found." That was true. It was an axiom which even Mrs. Surridge could understand. So far only a boat, a coat, and Susie's note had been discovered. If a letter had come it would be prima facie evidence that Jack had not been drowned. She leaned forward now and whispered the question direct:

"Did you get any news from—you know who, to-day, Susie?"

The girl's lips quivered. She grew quickly very white. "No, Auntie."

"Did you expect one, deary? Was it very impertant?"

Susie rose, her face flushing, her breast heaving, her eyes staring: "Don't! don't!" she begged. "He was to have been my husband—and now——"

Mrs. Surridge stood beside her, taking the poor scared eyes

to her breast; soothing her as she would a child, and mumbling all the while a paltry flow of quaint advice:

"La, Susie! don't take on; don't fret—there's a deary. It'll spoil your bright eyes and bring down the corners of your mouth —give you more lines than bringin' up a fam'ly. Sho! Bless us an' keep us—there's just as good fish in the sea as ever was catched."

CHAPTER VII

A Curtain Lecture

"IT'S my belief," said Mrs. Surridge to the room generally, but to her husband in particular, "that the pretty lamb is frettin' her soul to fritters."

There was no response; the room was in darkness and Tom sleeping noisily, with his face to the wall. His evident immunity from earthly worries, struck his wife in the light of sacrilege. She could not sleep for anxiety about Susie; why, therefore, should he? She twisted uneasily from side to side, earnestly seeking oblivion and wrecking the symmetry of the bed. At last, turning on her back she expostulated with her silent lord.

"Tom!" she cried.

Tom only snored the louder.

"Tom! . . . Sakes! what a bugil you have to be sure."

"Dang they pigs!" said Tom from the pillows.

"'Tain't the pigs, Tom—it's me."

This should have been sufficient even in these days of strong womanhood and jeering comments on the powers of a sex once called chivalrous. Tom should have risen to the occasion. But he did not rise. He grunted inaudibly instead; for he was a small man and very weary.

"I never see anyone sleep like you, Surridge," said his wife again. "If you were a toper there would be some excuse for it, but you couldn't sleep heavier."

"The pigs is all comferable, Mary. I see to 'em afore I locked up—likewise the fowils."

"I said to-night," returned his wife, "that unless a lass made her man jump afore she's wed, she might holla for him to jump afterwards, with no more effect than the bustin' of a blood wessel."

Surridge made no reply. It was evident from the sounds that he had again fallen asleep. The moonlight peeped in through the lattice, throwing elongated diamonds across the white bed covering. Mrs. Surridge sat up and surveyed her husband.

"It's my belief," she asserted, "that you have a diseage." Tom turned on his side and groaned a reply: "Sometimes I think it's a pity I ain't stone deaf," he retorted.

"You are worse than that."

Surridge lifted himself on his elbow, now fully awakened.

"What 's wrong, Missis? Ain't you near done talkin'?" he cried.

"It's my belief," said Mrs. Surridge, realising that at last she had succeeded in overcoming his lethargy, "it's my belief that the pretty lamb is fritterin' her soul to fretters."

"What pretty lamb?" he questioned. "We haven't got any lamb as I know of."

"It's a diseage you've got, Tom—there's no two ways about that, an' its name is deaf an ' stoopid."

"Why can't you talk sense if you must talk?" he cried with a groan.

"You used to think I talked sense," Mrs. Surridge replied, shaking the bed in her agitation. "You used to say I talked like honey droppin' from the comb."

Tom became mindful of an increasing desire for sleep; he also recognised that until he had got to the bottom of this trouble, he would have no chance; he replied, therefore, with an evasion:

"So you did, Mary—an' I can't say I've ever had cause to alter them words."

"That's the sweetest thing you've said for months," cried Mrs. Surridge as she administered a caress. "It's about Susie."

Tom withdrew to the farthest limit of the bed. "Oh, about Susie," he said, "what about her?"

"She's pining for letters from that Jack Elliott."

"Ah!"

"An' from all we can find out, Elliott's dead."

Tom sighed, but remained otherwise silent. His wife resumed:

"She musn't be let pine, Tom. She's too good to be throwed away single all her life. It would be shockin'."

"So it would," he assented with sympathy.

"Jim Saunderson is a fine figure of a man, Tom—an' most attentive, I'm sure."

"Too podgy about the waist," said Tom decisively, "an' I don't like the wein that shows in his forehead, ner his eyes, ner——"

"You never did like a big man so far as I can remember," Mrs. Surridge threw out.

Tom was silent. He was a small man, a perfect whipper-snapper, to speak correctly, and Mrs. Surridge had remarked upon it before. So he lay silent, waiting for the end of things.

"I call Jim Saunderson a fine figure of a man. He'd do any woman credit, he would."

"Susie may have so'thin' to say about that, Mary."

"You leave it to me."

"An' suppose Jack Elliott ain't dead—suppose——"

"Don't be a hass, Tom. Susie mustn't wait on Elliott—for reasons. You take the tip from me—if I want you to back

me up I'll look at you, otherwise, let it be to me. Why, Saunderson is the very man to make her a good husband.

"'Sides," she continued, "Susie couldn't marry Jack Elliott now, not even if he were back again—not respectable, she couldn't. Jack's livin' under a shadda—murder may not have been done by him, but," Mrs. Surridge pursed her lips, speaking with decision, "it's what is fastened on him, an' no gell can wed a man with a shadda an' be happy."

Tom breathed heavily. He never felt more inclined to expostulate in his life, but he was sleepy, and desired above all things to be at liberty to turn his face to the wall. He consented without words.

"You know as well as me, Tom," his wife continued cheerily, "that I don't hold with choppin' an' changin' your lovers. But this is not what you might call an ordinally case—in fact it's extre-ordinally. There's been murder done, an' there's no sayin' who's done it—but, it's cloaked on Elliott. An' even if Elliott comes back, which I consider impossible, he mustn't wed Susie. In fack he mustn't be let have the chance; Susie must be tied up to once."

Tom grunted sleepily, but it was sufficient acknowledgment to induce Mrs. Surridge to continue her remarks. Indeed, had he consented to grunt at appropriate intervals, she would have talked indefinitely, for, like Micky Doolan, she loved nothing better than the sound of her own arguments.

"An' seein' Susie must wed some other body," she asserted to the room in general, "Saunderson would be the very man for my money. He's just the right height, an' build, an' has settled down with a bit of savings put by. He's a man— only, it must be done judicious; no forcin' the gell, Tom—no—Tom!

"Blest if he ain't asleep again. Sakes!" she cried after surveying him on raised elbow; "the way some men do sleep is so'thin' crewl. It's a diseage—that's what I call it."

CHAPTER VIII

Zulu Supplies a Parallel

SUSIE'S reading of the prophecy of the sparks was nearer the truth than she imagined when suggesting it. Day after day passed; the weather became steadily colder; winter was at hand, winter and silence—the silence of death.

Jack had not written. At first it seemed possible that his letters had been lost; but with time there came questioning doubts. All the letters could not have been lost, for instance. The idea was manifestly absurd. And if he had not written—why? Was it that he had forgotten? The notion passed her mind in many forms. Only those who have waited quite understand the sting of it. This craving for news was slowly eating into the girl's life. Cynicism found voice—no man, she told herself, could forget so soon.

Yet, despite her torture, it was only at intervals that she relapsed into the apathetic condition which had so alarmed her friends. Indeed no one could long remain dull in a house containing such a bundle of good nature as Mrs. Surridge.

If she thought the girl looked more than usually wan, she took her by the sleeve and laughed and joked until Tom was "fair 'mazed with the tack of the old woman," as he expressed it. He was careful naturally to keep this view of the case for communication to the pigs and fowls which he visited at odd intervals during his meal hours. At this time it was not at all unusual to hear ringing peals of laughter issuing from the kitchen, and to see the door slowly open in order that Tom

might emerge to give his opinion to the pigs. This done he would return, winking solemnly, and sit down to finish his dinner or his pipe, and ruminate on the inexplicable aspect of affairs, until it was time to trudge back to his work.

Before many days had elapsed Susie discovered that her uncle drove frequently into Riverton, and found him willing to call at the post office. She discovered also the drift of her aunt's remarks on the manly beauty of Jim Saunderson, and so, having established a primitive code, would wait an opportunity of putting her questions without that lady's knowledge.

"Did you call, Uncle?"

"Aye, Susie."

"Anything for me?"

"Nothin', Susie."

Sometimes the dearth of news was passed simply from one to the other in silence. The girl, watching her chances, would look across the table with her pretty forehead puckered over raised brows; and Tom would gaze solemnly into his plate or cup, and frown and shake his head as though he saw the devil lurking there. After this he usually rose and went out to talk with the piglings. It was his safety valve. Some men work off their steam by swearing, but Surridge leaned over the sty doors in silent meditation on the prolific generosity of mother pigs. To them he could give his opinions free of restraint. To give them to Mrs. Surridge was to produce a curtain lecture of the Caudle brand. Tom preferred a lecture from the pigs.

Thus the time passed until, one day, nearly two months after Jack's departure, Surridge returned from Riverton with a companion seated beside him in the trap.

Susie had been a long while standing near the gate in anticipation of her uncle's coming, wondering with great round eyes what the day held in store for her, wondering whether by chance

a letter was on its way to greet her— whether Jack had written, whether he would write, whether he had ever intended to write. Then, on looking up, she saw the trap and the second figure. At once she imagined it to be her father, returned earlier by a few days than had been expected. But closer inspection revealed no clean-shaven face nor stooping back. It revealed a taller, bigger man, a man with a beard—Jim Saunderson.

For a moment the girl meditated feigning sickness, but relented on recognising the absurdity of such a course. She stood her ground therefore, and met her uncle's evident disapproval with all the sang-froid she could muster. Then, leading the way within, stood a minute telegraphing, and fled to her room.

There were no letters. Again were there no letters.

Susie threw herself across the bed foot. She lay prone upon her back, staring at the ceiling, marking the lines in the old oak beam; counting the cracks, the holes, the wonderful maze of minute holes—all no larger than pin-pricks in the wood.

There were no letters. She questioned why she was left in this horrible suspense? Why had he not written? Would he ever write? Would he? Would he? Surely he could do so if he chose. She could have found a way. Anyone who so desired it could find a way. Why then had Jack not found it?

A long while she lay thus, her eyes dry, her face flushed, her brain aching with the tension. She desired above all things an answer to this question,—"Why?" But it eluded her. In vapouring shapes, high among the shadows behind the old beams, it stole about, mocking, laughing, refusing capture. Two months had passed! She whispered it with a tense expression . . . two months, and he had promised to call her to him at once. Yet no word had come. A silence, deep as the

silence of the fields, had fallen upon his movements. It had crept into her life. A silence filled with dread, straining her nerves, banishing sleep—making her doubt the actuality of accomplished facts. Yet did she pause to consider, they stood out, a hideous array, droning a song whose burden was desertion. How trite a tale for her friends to read; how stale, how paltry, how humiliating! She, who had held so high a head, who had spoken always of love as the sole necessity in marriage—and now they could sneer, all of them, pointing out her indiscretions with the finger of unctuous scorn.

She turned from the difficult problem of finding an answer, and hiding her face found herself crying without tears: "Oh, it is cruel—cruel! I cannot bear it. I cannot——" She started at the knowledge the words conveyed and again faced the ceiling.

The maze met her. Cracks leading to nothing. Holes that were uncountable. Marks that led nowhither—and amidst it all a wonderful legend, a legend which bid her hope, which bid her wait. Which whispered of something more—something she could not trace—high up there, amidst the plaster or the beams or the crevices that would not stay filled.

Again a voice, not her own, but her aunt's, calling from the stair-foot, bade her come down to tea.

The notion appalled her. The commonplace necessity of the thing echoed like a laugh in her brain. But she rose at once, wondering at the simplicity which had suggested abstinence. She crossed the room and came to the door, calling as she moved: "Yes, yes, coming, Auntie," then, turning, stood before the glass.

What flushed cheeks, what frightened eyes, what a tumbled head! Could it be herself, or had she—had she—— She used to be self-possessed, self-reliant. People had said so.

Now her self-control had vanished and self-reliance was going also.

Like steam thrown into a fog, it melted and disappeared. Against her will the thought crept like a shadow—Jack had forgotten.

In the kitchen they were waiting for her. She bustled about composing her features and arrived with cold eyes, white cheeks and statuesque pose; silent, watching, searching their faces. Tea was spread and Saunderson stood near the fire talking; but as she entered he crossed over and took her hand. Tom Surridge noting her scared expression hastened into the yard on a fancied errand to the pigs.

"La!" cried Mrs. Surridge as she became aware of her husband's departure; "I never see such a man. If they were his own children, he couldn't do more for 'em."

Susie considered the mattter from an immense distance. She gathered the meaning of his exit and set herself to act as though no question throbbed in her brain; as though no thought had stolen upon her and refused to be dismissed. She laughed softly—the ghost of laughter merely, and was astonished to notice how they stared. Then her uncle returned,. He found that they had not waited. His wife presided at the table whence she dispensed tea and smiles; and, most curious phase of all, Susie seemed to be entering into the fun of the thing with as much zest as her aunt.

Surridge took his place in silence. He understood women collectively as little as his wife understood him. He only saw that his guest was the recipient of all the favours of the party, and frowned and shook his head quite unguardedly.

"I didn't bring no letters," he thought. "I never signalled I did. What's come to the gell, I can't think, no more than Zulu can."

Zulu was the sow.

"Seems to me I'd best let things went," he said aloud.

"What things, Tom?"

"Zulu's number four have got her ear cut," he replied, steadily returning his wife's gaze.

"Oh—how did that come?"

"She were friendly with Jacob—from the lower sty—an Zulu's put her nose in; wants her to take up with old Tammas. It ain't fair on Jacob, so he's split her ear."

"Tom!" cried his wife with mock severity; "you're a disgrace to any Christian woman, with your stories an' your fencies—'a-done!"

She laughed heartily as she spoke, utterly oblivious of the fable's application; Then, noticing Susie's flushed cheeks, shook her head and started a new subject as though to the manner born. So they continued, laughing and chatting until, tea having come to an end, Mrs. Surridge rose and, signing to her husband, left the room. Saunderson at once crossed over and stood by the girl.

"Have you thought any more about coming back to Abbeyville?" he questioned.

Susie looked up. Her face betrayed no astonishment, no anger; it might have been the veriest trifle that he had suggested in those ringing tones he knew so well how to use. She said:

"No," and then, "why should I?"

"Can't you do anything for my sake; can't you—can't you?" he reiterated.

Again the answer fell without a vestige of self-consciousness, utterly cold, unutterably pathetic: "No—why should I?"

Saunderson caught her by the hand, staring into her beautiful eyes, his face flushed, his voice trembling with emotion.

"Because I love you, Susie. Because I love you and would die to see you happy."

She drew back with a sudden movement and cried with vehemence:

"Love! Nonsense! There is no such thing; there never was—never will be. Yet, once, I believed in love; but that was long ago . . . long ago—do you understand? long—long ago."

She spoke with such passion, clasping and unclasping her hands, that Saunderson, watching and abashed, could only gaze in silence; hungrily, as one who would dare all for the sake of simple possession; who had it in mind to catch that frail, palpitating soul in his arms and hold her there till she promised to comply with his desire. But he retained his self-control by a strong effort and continued to urge his cause.

"Susie," he begged, "you don't know how I want to help you; how I would do anything on earth to make you think better of me. I would go on my knees to you—if I thought it would do me any good; I would lie down an' let you kick me with your little shoe—if I thought you would be any prouder of me—but it wouldn't help me— it wouldn't help me—Susie! what shall I do—what shall I say?"

"Say? Nothing. Words mean so much—sometimes."

Saunderson drew back a pace; his eyes took a new tinge.

"No," he cried, "I won't go on my knees to you—because—it would make you despise me—that's why. A woman despises a man that treats her always with honey. Very well—I don't go on my knees to you; but I stand here now an' tell you that presently you'll wed Jim Saunderson; that you'll wed him whether you love him or not—because you won't be able to help yourself."

He advanced a step nearer, extending his arms: "Come,"

he cried, "don't try to fight me; don't try to drive me away. It isn't any use. I don't ask for too much love—I don't ask for too many kisses. I ask for you. Come, child—it will be easier than fighting me—easier—easier. Oh, God love you, come to me. There's nothin' I won't do for you—nothin' nothin'——"

His appeal left her entirely unmoved. She faced him; looked into his eyes, noted his gestures—but there the matter ended; oblivion stepped in, and that cold, methodical, precise speech which so annoyed him, came to her aid.

"I have no wish to be married," she said at length. "I don't think you can say that I encouraged you. I don't——"

"Encouraged me!" Saunderson laughed grimly. It seemed such an excellent joke—encouraged him—he was uncertain whether she deliberately designed to anger and insult him, or whether—— His voice leaped upon his thoughts.

"Encourage me! Aye, if 'go to hell' is encouragement—then you have encouraged me—not else."

She took no notice; his violence escaped her; she said very quietly: "I am sorry."

"So am I."

"And I hope you will forget all about—this—this conversation; and that I——"

"No!" he cried vehemently. "I'll not do that either. I'll remember it all the days of my life—and so will you." Then, in a softer voice, as though alarmed at his own passion: "Susie, is there nothin' I can do to make you love me? Is there nothin' —nothin'? "

She looked up now with a little shiver. "Only leave me alone," she begged. "Only that."

He swung round at once. "It's a thing I can do," he announced over his shoulder.

He passed Mrs. Surridge and her husband on the threshold, nodded grimly and left the house. The two came into the kitchen.

"Well," said Tom, with a gasp of dismay, "if that ain't so'thin', I don't know what is. Never a word—same as if we might be flies in his tea—flick! an' he's gone."

He stood staring at Susie in unfeigned amazement. His wife caught the look, heard his remarks and turned upon him with a sharp question:

"What's wrong now?"

Tom was about to reply, but he detected advice written in Mrs. Surridge's manner, and fell into a new key:

"Why, Zulu's got holt of number four, an' she's givin' her hop-scotch," he replied, and vanished in the direction of the sties.

That night Tom found himself, by chance, alone in the kitchen with Susie. His wife had gone out with a neighbour. Coming in, he had discovered the girl sitting in the arm chair staring into the fire, an open book lying unheeded on her lap. Tom approached at once:

"You didn't mistake me, Susie?" he asked.

"How, Uncle?"

"Why—in that signallin' business—about the letters."

"No, why?" the question leaped eagerly as the girl sprang upright. "Why—did you bring any?"

"No—don't worry, Susie." He spoke quickly, noting her tell-tale face. "No. There weren't any. But I thought you mistook my meanin', you looked so gay, so blithe, you know."

"Gay—blithe?"

Tom glanced about; the house was very silent. He determined to get at the bottom of this matter. He leaned for-

ward speaking in low tones; "Do you care for yon chap, Susie?"

"Saunderson?"

"Aye."

Susie lifted her hands as though she weighed the question. "Care for him? I am afraid of him—nothing else."

"That's cur'us," said Tom. "I thought you liked him amazin'."

The girl answered in a resigned and pathetic tone: "Is that why you told us the story about Zulu and Jacob? Yes—yes, I understood. Why is it all so dreadfully difficult? Why am I left to struggle with him alone. I hate him. Uncle, where is Jack—where is Jack?"

She propounded the sentence so suddenly; in such quick, nervous accents, that Tom was flustered. He forgot, altogether, his wife's instructions. "I don't know," he said.

"Tell me—tell me! Will he write? Will he write?" Her voice broke with the sound of weeping, and Tom hastened to stay it.

"Of course he'll write. A course he will. Maybe he's doin' it now. If 't'were me, Susie, he would be. Law! how could he help it. Why—he couldn't—now, could he?"

Susie swayed to and fro, moaning dumbly, searching for a loophole. "He promised . . . he promised. It's two months . . . two whole months since then—and——"

"Law! a course it is," Tom repeated, and strayed across to put his hand on her shoulder. "You see," he explained, "he's gone to Franch. It's a long way—so I'm told. It takes a while to get to Franch; weeks it takes—then——"

She cried out suddenly with laughter and tears: "No, no! Oh! indeed, it would not take a day."

Tom withdrew his hand. He was more astray than ever.

"I wouldn't wonder," he remarked in desperation, "if it weren't Franch after all. Maybe it was China."

Susie fell back into the chair and relapsed into a fit of laughter and tears. The tears blinded her; the laughter choked her, or she would have seen Tom's face of utter dismay as he hastened to fetch restoratives.

He knew of only one. He had seen his mother use it years ago, and searched for the materials.

He came back after a lapse of minutes, armed with a large sponge filled with water. The screams filled the kitchen; Susie lay with her head bowed low on the arm of the chair. She could not have been better placed. Surridge looked upon this simple fact as the direct intervention of Providence, and cushioned the sponge carefully in the curve of her cheek and ear.

The girl sprang erect, laughing now and struggling with a desperation that alarmed the little man. The laugh went through him; filled his ears. He shrank back appalled, and at the same moment the door opened to admit his wife. She stood a moment surveying the scene, and woman-like, grasped its meaning.

"'Stericks," she remarked. "An' Tom playin' the fool. 'A-done! Susie! An' Tom, you drop that sponge."

She took the girl in her arms as she spoke; glared at her husband, who instantly beat a retreat, and the trouble was ended.

Thereafter, Tom made no further attempts at consolation. The ways of women were quite ridiculous. He was awake the best part of the night, listening to instructions from his wife.

On the whole he considered it much easier to rule Zulu and her progeny.

CHAPTER IX

The Methods of the Scorcher

AGAIN the old brig *Tantalus* lay at her moorings off Riverton, waiting turn to discharge cargo into the Black Diamond hulk; and Sutcliffe was within ken of his crowding troubles.

The "Scorcher," a name which the executor of Dunscombe's affairs had already earned, had been on the prowl all day: peering into lockers, store-rooms, galley, hold, and cabin—everywhere, indeed, where a man's nose may sniff or his eyes obtain a vision. It was as natural for him to suspect a lie as it is for most Thames skippers to tell one. He came from an up-river wharf, where he had been manager, with the reputation of never having believed the truth when he heard it. A statement more damaging among the shrewd casuists he ruled than any plain expression of villainy.

His creed was: All men are born liars, but a bargee is a more gratuitous species of liar than any others of the tribe." In dealing with them, and the riverside fraternity, he made a mental reservation—"These men are liars," and he treated them consistently.

Already there were those who prophesied trouble with the hands as a result of the new management; but then, there are always croakers in a camp where one digger is placed in authority over brother diggers. As a digger has been found the hardest taskmaster for kindred diggers, so the small shipowner, the small shopkeeper, have been found the most un-

relenting, the most pettifogging of drivers in civilised gold-seeking.

It was whispered that the "Scorcher," whose real name was Michael Jones, came from " Taffy-land," and the riverside wags had many stories of his early boyhood. These, in any other community, might have redounded to his credit—but not here, where it is considered derogatory for a master to have had his beginnings at the pitside, where, apparently, he had wandered barefoot, collecting heaps of pickings for barter.

On this day Sutcliffe's life was a burden for him. His voyage had not been a success, and the "Scorcher" had not failed to comment on the fact. The old man had hoped to get home at once to assure himself that all was as well with the lil' lass, as her letters had given him to understand. Also it is a skipper's prerogative to land as soon as his ship is securely moored. Sutcliffe therefore felt distinctly aggrieved at his master's lack of consideration.

It was eight o'clock when at length he arrived at the picturesque cottage near the woods, and discovered Susie awaiting his arrival. A hand went out—the old signal—and in a moment the girl was in his arms.

"Eh!" the lil' lass," he cried. "It's good to see you blithe again. Eh! it's good—thank Gawd for it. Why, bless my soul," he continued, holding back and viewing her with pride and delight gleaming in his eyes; if it were'n' that you're a bit thinner an' whiter, I'd say you are the same as ever you were down at the old home."

Mrs. Surridge who had been a witness to the meeting, and now stood by beaming massively upon them, broke in at once: "Sakes!" she cried. "She's as fit as fit: gettin' as plump as a parterige in September—colour all right, eyes bright as you

want; don't you worry about that. I say there'll be weddin' bells ringin' shortly—that's the least I expect, brother."

Tom Surridge, who had been hovering behind his wife's more substantial identity, slunk out through the kitchen at these words. He was a tender-hearted man, and knowing what he knew, viewed the dubious marriage proposals in the light of sacrilege—only he called it by a different name as he went out to take counsel with the pigs.

Susie smiled and hastened to turn the conversation into a new channel.

"How late you are," she said. "We have been expecting you all day."

"Since dinner time we have," Mrs. Surridge chimed, as they trooped in to prepare supper.

A gray shadow stole over the old man's face. The recollection of certain difficulties in which he had become involved, smote him, and he fell back on a recitation of the most prominent. He spoke slowly again; in the ringing tones of one who recognises that he is hemmed in, beaten on all issues, and must surrender.

"I couldn't get out before, lass. It's almost a wonder I'm here now, as the sayin' is. There's the new Guv'nor aboard all day—pokin' his nose into every corner of the ship: worse than Dunscombe, he is, in that way—an' as for takin' you at your word, why, he don't—an' there's an end."

Sutcliffe sank into an armchair before the fire and spread his hand to the blaze; he watched them over his shoulder, laying the cloth.

"We were onlucky on the trip home, you see. Had a accident. It's many a day since I were ashore with the old brig; but I got caught, fair an' square, as the sayin' is, about half ebb."

Susie stayed her help and stood watching her father as he remembered. He said, still in the slow, thrashed voice:

"'Last voyage when we're at home, I says to the Guv'nor, 'Sir, our sails are gettin' pretty percurious; we'll be wantin' a new fit out from keel to truck before long.'

"'Sho!' says he, 'why—what's wrong wiv 'em. They don't look bad.'

"'No, sir,' I answer, 'but it ain't always the things as look best, that are best, on a job like that.'

"'They'll have to stand, Sutcliffe; there's no two ways about that,' says he. 'Why, look at last voyage,' he says, 'ten days from Hull to the Pool. Lawd! wheer do you think the money's to come from while you an' your crew are eatin' your heads off at sea? Damn it, Sutcliffe, you must shake a bit more out of the *Tantalus*—or, she won't be wo'th her keep.'

"'Give me the kites, sir,' says I, 'an' the brig will show some of 'em the road yet. But who can do anythin' in the way of a passage, wiv the likes of that?' An' I walked him acrost to the main hatch wheer Micky Doolan's at work on the leech of our stay-fores'l; wheer it's double, you understand, an' I took it in hand an' tore it across as easy as eatin' peas wiv a spoon—him watchin' me all the time. 'If that ain't proof, sir,' says I; 'Lumme! if I know what is.'

"'Chucks!' says he. 'Dry rot—that's what that is. Why in thunder do you leave your sails stowed wet? Hold on! don't tear any more—it's got to stand.'

"'Beggin' to differ, sir,' says I, 'that's not sun rot—it's rot from age. Dunscombe bought these sails off a salvage case—when they ought to have been condemned.'

"An' wiv that, Susie, the Scorcher turns on his heel an' will hardly look at me the rest of the day. So we sailed an' got

caught in a breeze comin' down the Maplins; lost our rags;* drove ashore—an' there you are, as the sayin' is."

Susie stood white and trembling before her father; her hand moving irresolutely about his neck. He put out his arm and drew her to him with a touch of the old buoyant hope; the hope now so nearly dead.

"Sho!" he whispered, "how nervous you've grown. Why—bless us, there's nothin' in that—there's no harm done. Why, the Maplins are soft as a baby's lips; wouldn't hurt a soul, not in calm weather," he reserved, "let alone a ship." His voice fell again, he mumbled under his breath gazing intently at the fire: "Maybe the old brig's a bit cleaner about the garbage streaks, an' keel; maybe she's a trifle hogged,† but she's none the worse for that. They all get hogged wiv time—like old men crooked by heavy loads long borne—long borne—a job like that."

Susie stood fondling the gray ringlets, petting the creased brow, smoothing the collar of his coat; but she made no effort to speak. Her eyes had followed his; she, too, stared into the fire.

Mrs. Surridge came boisterously into the gap, flourishing her potato masher like a club. "Sakes alive!" she cried, "don't you go playin' any tricks, brother—'taint' safe, not at your age. An' as for that Scorcher chap, I wish I had his dirty face under this masher of mine. If I wouldn't give him ecollomy, I don't know," she concluded with a vigorous slam as she placed the saucepan lid on the stove. But Sutcliffe was not to be warned; he failed to notice the girl's silence. He felt her touch; her face was withheld.

"I don't know," he said; "maybe the Guv'nor is not so black as he's painted. He's got some heart—an' that is more than you can say for Dunscombe."

* Sails. † Hog-backed, i. e., no longer straight but raised in the middle.

Mrs. Surridge produced a dish wherein to turn the potatoes: "Heart?" she cried indignantly, "the man that can act as you've said, hasn't a heart—it's a flip-jack, fried tough as leather."

Sutcliffe smiled. "Sho!" he replied. "I'm rememberin' Dunscombe. There's no one that can be a patch on Dunscombe. He was not only mean—he was cruel, cowardly cruel into the bargain."

"No, Susie," he resumed as they drew up to the table in response to Mrs. Surridge's invitation, and Tom came back from his visit to the pigs, "no—you may reckon on the old man bein' kereful not to run onnecessary risks, for the sake of all. But sooner or later trouble is bound to come out of this business —an' I would rather you were prepared—on a job like that."

The girl found voice to question eagerly: '"How, Father?" and Sutcliffe continued:

"I'll tell you, lass—but it has to do wiv natural causes; causes that are bound to come, because they have to do wiv old age alone.

"I've been skipper of the *Tantalus* this fifteen year or more. Man an' boy I've known her thirty. She can't be for many years a top of that; it's not in reason, because she's worn. So, because she's old and don't pay, or get lost, as maybe she ought, it don't pay to do much in the way of repairs. A bit longer—the Lawd alone knows when on a job like that an' the old lady will have to be lost or sold foreign; an' I will have coiled down the strings for the last time about her taffrail aft.

"No," he went on sadly, "it ain't easy to look forward to a thing like that; but it will come . . . an' it will have to be faced. It's comin'. I know that from a word the Scorcher dropped to-day. I'm askin' for a new mains'l an' fore-stays'l,

in place of them we blowed away in the breeze. Says he, 'You'll have to do wiv the old sails out of the *Bluebell*—we'll patch 'em up for you, an' next time you have the chance, Sutcliffe, why——' He stops an' looks at me out of his small eyes. 'What?' says I, 'down the cellar wiv her?' 'No fool!' he says. 'Make a clean sweep of it—then we can come on the club for a refit, an' sell her afterward.' "

Mrs. Surridge strove to turn the conversation; she laughed boisterously at nothing in particular, made an observation which verged on idiocy; but Sutcliffe could not see; he continued in his grave, worn tones:

"You see, it's like this—when a ship has been runnin' thirty years or more, an' has paid as the old brig must a paid in times gone by, she don't stand at anythin' on her owner's books. She has wiped out her cost a long while. But now steam's come in she don't pay, freights are cut, she's slow an' it don't pay to reclass her. So they just keep her joggin', or moor her in the thick of the traffic, or wait till the Gov'ment drops alongside an' condemn her. Then they must make a move; so they sell her to the Dutchmen—hoist a dirty flag across her starn in place of a clean one—stick in a crew of Dutch chysers an' run her in her old trade. There's no alteration made, nothin' done to her; but now she can run on as before and wait for the end—wiv a crew of Dutchmen instead of her own. Nothin' else—nothin'—a job like that."

Susie steadied her eyes and looked across at her father: "Better to be sold than that she should be a death trap—to you. The risk is so dreadful—and yet I shall be sorry—yes, I shall be sorry."

"Not more than I will, Susie. Eh! not more than I will. It's a weary while since I had what you might call happiness on board of her; but it will be like cuttin' the old man's arm

off, or his leg—when she goes. Aye, I'd as lief she went down the cellar, as the sayin' is; it would be easier."

Mrs. Surridge assumed a gaiety she did not feel and sprang into the conversation with an assertion of her belief. "She's not goin' down the cellar, brother. An' as for callin' yourself old—why, it's suttinly nothin' more or less than a libel. Shockin'! shockin'! an' me sittin' beside you only two year behind. Have another cut of the hand, George—or do you like the knuckil best?"

"Take another glawss o' ale, George," said Tom, as he pushed the jug across the table. "You're a bit down on your luck, mate—that's what you are."

"Six hours bumpin' on the sands ain't goin' to make a man feel ezactly as bright as it'll make the old brig's copper," Sutcliffe returned. "Eh! sister—I'm not what I was. Fifty-five years is what I am; forty-five of 'em spent trapsin' up an' down the old river for somebody else's benefit. Forty-five years, Susie—gatherin' what? How do I stand? A'most broke—a'most broke." His eyes took a far away look as he spoke. The sad gray-blue eyes that saw no one present; marked nothing of the danger with which his words were charged; looked only into the past as he toyed with his glass.

"Fifty years on the old river brings a man alongside the passon for the second time—on some other body's shoulder. Fifty years of river life is three-score an' ten ashore . . . an' what has the old man gathered, as the sayin' is, durin' that spell?

"Nowt, Susie. Nowt beyond maybe a debt or so. Debts are heavy to wipe off when a man has got over his prime. I'm over my prime—long over; an' I've been hit—still, there's been other things more worth thinkin' of, on a job like that. There was Lucy—Gawd rest her bright soul—an' the lil' lass.

Aye, the lil' lass came to take the place of her that left me. But Susie an' Gawd alone know the mis'ry of my life since she was took. Eh! if we could only look ahead as we can look back. If when Gawd has some new move on the board for us, he'd give us a sight of what lies ahead—what a crowd of poor devils would never take that move, never—never.

"Sho! what are we talkin' of? Dreamin', Susie, that's what I call it—dreamin' an' playin' the fool."

Supper was over. They all rose, and Susie moved across to Sutcliffe's side. She put her arms about his neck and kneeling beside him, kissed him on the forehead.

"Don't trouble dear," she begged. "Don't worry about the future. You couldn't help things—going as they have. No one could. And as for the debts,"—she rallied her forces, speaking brightly, "why we will work hard and pay them off. You and I. Oh! you little know what I can do, or how strong and clever I—I——"

She broke off abruptly, stammered, and fell into silence. For a moment it seemed as though the cord of her memory had snapped—then, laughing a little hysterically, she fled to her room.

CHAPTER X

In Limine

NIGHT had fallen on the quiet village nestling so sleepily in the hollow of the Kentish hills, a soft, still night, with a young moon creeping through the skeleton trees across the way.

The tired world was already adrowse. Scarcely a sound came from the tiny hamlet straggling up the road where the two men had gone soon after supper. Susie was in bed, but sleep would not come.

Something not to be accounted for had happened to the beams and ceiling overhead, or was it the cracks or those minute pinholes or the stained blotches moving in that wilderness of white plaster? She could not understand it. It puzzled her extremely. She felt the necessity for a closer examination and crept from her bed to carry out the desire; then, straightway loosing the thread, discovered that she moved to her aunt's room.

Mrs. Surridge was preparing for rest and had not heard the door open. She started and came forward at the sight of a blanched face and white-robed figure, standing framed by the darkness of the passage.

"La, Susie!" she cried, "how you do startle a body. Sakes alive! what's the matter now?"

The girl came in, closed the door, and stood leaning against the foot of the bed. She spoke slowly, reiterating her sentences in a fashion that was quite novel.

"I want to talk to you, Auntie. I want to talk to you. I can't sleep until I have talked to you."

Mrs. Surridge moved forward and took her hand drawing her across the room. "You'll catch your death, niece—an' what else could one expect, with you standin' there with hardly a cover for your pretty shoulders. La, Susie! don' be a ninny," she hurried on, as the girl flushed crimson; "they are pretty—pretty as picters, an' white an' warm with sweet flesh an' blood—which is more than you can say about picters an' such."

She wrapped the soft girlish figure in a shawl, then with a quick, impulsive gesture, bent down and kissed her neck.

"Sakes alive! how you do burn. Your neck's afire, child—your neck's afire."

"Don't, please don't," Susie begged, struggling in her strong grasp.

"It's good for gells to know they're beautiful, 'specially when they're near to marriage," her aunt insisted. "It'll come, Susie. La! it's bound to come. Sho! deary, don't take on—it's only your aunt fondlin' you because she loves you an' has no chick of her own to see settled."

"You are very kind. Indeed I am grateful," Susie returned, clinging to her impulsively, "but I want to ask you something."

Mrs. Surridge pushed her to a seat on the bed. "Aye, deary—an' what's that?"

"Father was saying, when I came through the kitchen a while ago, something about a debt—or some debts that he had. He was talking to Uncle, and when I passed he stopped. At supper, too, he spoke of the difficulty of paying debts when men grow old. He seemed much put out—much put out. What is it all about? Can you tell me?"

Mrs. Surridge at once grew grave. She faced the girl with a warning note in her voice. "It's as well you asked me,

Susie—for all the horses on the farm wouldn't drag it out of George—it's foolishness, that's what I call it."

"What is? and why is it foolishness?"

"Because, Susie, it's a debt that you could wipe out."

The girl faced her with sudden energy. "That I could wipe out?" she questioned. "I—I have no money."

"You have what is worth much more."

"What *do* you mean?"

"What I say—yourself, child, your own pretty self."

"Who would take me in payment?" Susie demanded with bitter sarcasm.

"Jim Saunderson would, an' thankful."

"Oh don't! don't! don't!"

The girl's cry was so heart-breaking that for a moment even the match-making instinct of this quaint bundle of interference quailed before it. But Mrs. Surridge had decided that it was necessary Susie should marry. She had decided that it would be unwise to allow her to wait longer for Elliott. She went farther and announced to Tom that such a proceeding would be followed by "the Lord knows what all," and Tom, duly impressed and only vaguely guessing at her meaning, agreed. Mrs. Surridge continued therefore to urge her plan.

"If it were possible," she remarked, "to sit still an' see you frettin' your soul to fritters, I'd say no more. But it ain't. Besides, I holt that one man's as good as another in this case. You don't know how you'll come to love him—an' then there's father to remember, deary. That's what I look at."

Susie sat rocking slowly to and fro, her cheeks aflame. "Does Father owe this money to Jim Saunderson?" she threw out.

"He has for a long while, an' now he asks for it."

"And does he know of this—this proposal?"

"La!" cried Mrs. Surridge breaking in with ready apology.

"A course he does—only we don't put it like that. Why, everybody knows of the debt an' the payment that's asked—same as if it had been in the papers."

"He has never said anything to me," Susie faltered tearlessly.

"That's why I tell you, deary. Bless the gell, you know father would be sold up before he'd say a word. That's what is troubling him—you know that, surely."

For some minutes there was a dead silence in the little room. Susie cowered against the bed-rail, her breast heaving convulsively. Her breath came in quick, uncertain gasps; her fingers twined and intertwined. A strange look crept into her eyes. She faced her aunt, speaking swiftly: "Have you heard anything of Jack?"

"There's rumours, Susie," Mrs. Surridge admitted, caught napping by the question.

"Rumours of what? Speak! Tell me—or I shall go mad."

Mrs. Surridge hedged. "There's no sayin' for certain. Sakes it's——"

"Is he safe?"

"I don't know. No one knows."

"Is he dead?"

The girl's voice rang with terrible earnestness. She started to her feet and seizing her aunt by the shoulders, gazed into her face with quivering lips; an awful terror dancing in her eyes. Mrs. Surridge tried to avoid the question. Her wits were a chaos under the catechism. But Susie held her transfixed as she reiterated the sentence: "Is he dead?"

"Don't look like that. Susie! it cuts me like a knife. Aye, aye—maybe it's that. It is God's will deary—that——"

She stopped speaking. Susie had fallen back on the bed as she caught the full meaning of the broken sentences. She sat rocking to and fro with quick, nervous movement. "He is

dead!" she cried out, "dead—dead! God has taken him from me He had no right. He was mine—he was mine."

"Child! Child! Susie, my deary!" her aunt protested aghast.

"Dead! dead! He should have lived—and I have blamed him. Oh! he was mine—he was mine. Why have you taken my husband away? My husband—do you understand? Dead! dead! Oh God! why?——"

"Susie! Have patience—have patience."

"Patience!" she broke out, swaying, hot with passion and excitement. "You don't understand. He was my lover. Long ago we were to have been married; long ago it was all arranged. Jack!" the girl's voice took a tender inflection at the mention of his name, "I loved you, dear—I loved you always. We grew up together. We were lovers always—always. They let me think you had forgotten, and now they say you are dead—and that God has taken you because it was better so——"

"Susie, I never said it—you know me better." Mrs. Surridge vainly attempted to stay the storm she had raised. She leaned forward trying to catch the girl in her arms, but Susie sprang back.

"No, you don't say it, but others do, and you half mean it. God! I am tired of hearing of what God has done. It is always God—God, every time anything happens that hurts us. Mother quavered of God till my heart was sick. If a neighbour was drowned, it was God's will; not the fault of a crazy ship. If a girl went wrong, it was God's will; not her own. If the factory smoke stifled us, it was God's will, not the direction of the wind. Oh! I am sick to death of the nonsense. I am sick to death of it all."

Mrs. Surridge listened, still protesting her amazement:

"Child! I am sorry to hear you say so; indeed, I would not have believed it possible from what I've seen of you. Sit still, deary—don't take on. It's weary work, I know—but you'll take comfort, in time you will."

Silence fell in the little room. Susie remained with her face buried in her hands; swaying, terribly in earnest. Suddenly she lifted her head and a question leaped from her lips:

"How do you know that what you say is true?"

"Because his boat was found."

"Where?"

"Cast up on the mud, top of Sea Beach. It was the Garter Pier boat that he'd borrowed."

"How do you know? Did anyone see him?" Susie cried instantly.

"His coat was found—tied up in a bundle an' jammed under the seat. There was a letter in the pocket."

"Give it to me! Give it to me! It is mine—it must be mine," she wailed in agony.

"It was yours, Susie. You sent it to him. Steady, Susie—there's no sort of comfort to be got from that." She searched in her pocket and handed the note which she had obtained from her brother before he went out, and in pursuance of her plan of intervention. It was a little, crumpled, water-stained note the girl had written only a few days before Jack's last visit. She seized it eagerly; spreading it out with fingers that shook.

"Dear Jack, please, please come out to see me——" The words struck her. She moved to and fro, moaning, dumb with pain. Then checking her grief, caught at her aunt's arm and whispered in hot expectation: "How do you know—How do you know he is——"

In Mrs. Surridge's mind only one fact loomed of any importance. The girl must not be allowed to wait for Elliott.

She replied in even tones, the tones of one who did not at all recognise the nature of what was said: "Father tells me his boat was cut pretty nigh in half, Susie. He can't——"

"Cut in half. What do you mean?"

"There's been an accident, child. He's towin' down river an' suthin' happened. The steamer has come astern, an' it's all over."

The brusque recital of so grim a tragedy, given almost in Sutcliffe's own words, forced a picture of the circumstances into the girl's quicker brain. She had heard of these things; knew much of the swift and noiseless deaths of the river men; had seen the groups standing over stranded remains, whispering details of the end. The picture burned before her, and she clasped her hands over her eyes, striving to shut it out. She remained so still, so stricken with the pain of living that her aunt grew alarmed. She marvelled at what she could not comprehend; approached and began to speak. But Susie started backward, her voice ringing with terror.

"Don't touch me! Don't touch me! Let me think. Horrible . . . horrible!"

She sprang to her feet and faced her aunt. "How long have you known this?" she demanded.

"Maybe a month. Don't fret—don't fret—there's a deary."

"A month!"

The exclamation fell like a bolt from heaven on plain, matter-of-fact Mrs. Surridge. She gasped with apprehension. Susie's voice sounded again: "Why was I not told?"

"We dared not tell you," she whimpered.

"And so you let me think he had forgotten. Kind . . . kind."

"We were afraid it would kill you, child—we were afraid," Mrs. Surridge moaned.

"Better so," she returned with hot, dry eyes. "Better so. Why should I live if Jack is dead? What use am I alone? Always we were one—always we were together. Oh! my dear, why did you not have mercy on me and tell me you were dead. I would have come—I would have come."

She fell back among the pillows moaning pitifully. Mrs. Surridge cried, too, and strove to assure herself that she had acted for the best. She touched Susie's lips, attempting to soothe her with caresses.

"There's others beside Jack that love you," she whispered.

The girl started as though she had been struck. Her eyes flashed anger. "Jim Saunderson!" she cried.

Mrs. Surridge quailed. "Not alone," she gasped, "there's us: father, uncle, an' me—what would we do, deary?"

"You are laughing at me. Everyone is laughing at me. Oh! you are cruel! cruel!"

Suddenly she leaped from the bed and stood tugging at the buttons of her nightdress. In a moment the flimsy fastenings were torn asunder and the dress flung to the ground.

"I can't breathe, I shall suffocate!" she cried with a curious laugh. "What does it matter to you whether I live or die? It doesn't matter—nothing matters."

"Susie! Susie!" Mrs. Surridge was aghast at the sight. She strove to speak but words failed her; she could only reiterate, "You know we all love you."

The girl faced her with impetuous scorn. "Oh, yes . . . I forgot. You all love me—and so, I am to be sold. Do you think that sounds consistent? I am to be sold?"

She leaned forward clasping her head with trembling hands, her hair streaming like a flood of gold about her shoulders, her breast heaving, her white skin aglow in the lamplight. Her eyes, flashing over crimson cheeks, looked out through a frame

of glorious hair. "They are pretty shoulders, aren't they?" she laughed, suddenly sarcastic. "A pretty breast, too. And all to be sold—all to be sold. You said so, mind! Of course I'm pretty. Do you think if I weren't pretty anyone would bother about me? Come, tell me how much is this debt. Tell me so that I may have some idea of my value."

Mrs. Surridge could only gasp: "Oh, Lawd! the gell's mad. What can I do? What can I do?"

"You won't tell me," the voice went on, scathingly: "of course not. Is it likely? You, who tell me everything? Then I must guess. What is it now? twenty pounds? thirty? forty? fifty? You won't say. I might have known it. Well, but there couldn't be a bigger debt than that. Fifty pounds! Why, that's not much for a beautiful girl—is it? A gentle girl, too—and loving. Trust me, I would never grow old or querulous or practise nagging." Then again in the old key: "Auntie, I am beautiful, am I not? It isn't all a mistake, is it? Tell me, tell me."

The words poured out in a hot and babbling stream. The girl stood erect, blazing with scorn, indignation, contempt; without a vestige of self-consciousness, intent on her demand to be told.

"You're a little fool!" Mrs. Surridge snorted as she hastened toward her with a wrap. "Have done with your nonsense."

Susie's mood changed instantly. She came over, meekly awaited her aunt's assistance, drew the proffered cloak about her, and huddled down into a corner of the bed.

"Now you are cross," she pleaded. "Don't be cross—it is no use. Oh! I wish I could cry—I used to be able to cry. My head is splitting; my eyes are burning—why have you set me on fire?"

She leaned forward and her aunt took her head on her broad

bosom, soothing her as she would a child. "La!" she crooned, glancing anxiously at the clock. "La, there—there—rest quiet, poor dear, rest quiet—there's a lamb. I wish," she continued, sotto voce, as she strained her ears to catch the sound of approaching footsteps: "I wish them guzzlers no harm, but the Lawd look sideways on 'em if they ain't in sharp." She drew the cloak about the girl's shoulders, buttoning it as she spoke. Susie sat beside her gazing into vacancy, silent, despondent; then, turning with a quick movement, she pointed across the room.

"I see him, Auntie. You are quite wrong. Jack is not dead."

The name fell with so much decision that, almost involuntarily, Mrs. Surridge followed the girl's glance with a question.

"Where, Susie?"

"There, pulling—pulling in that small boat. Look! how tiny it is. Can he be safe—can he be safe?"

"A course he can. He's a sailor an' knows how to manage."

"But the sea is wide—so wide and so lonely. If any wind comes—that little boat is no use."

"Let's hope it'll stay cawlm," Mrs Surridge returned. A conviction that the girl was mad had penetrated slowly to her brain. She argued that she must humour her, eke out the time until her husband returned and do all in her power to prevent excitement. The girl's reply fell on her ears.

"Because," she was saying, "if anything happened to Jack, it would all go wrong—because, you see, I am his wife."

"Susie, don't you fret," came the reply, "nothin' can happen to men—they are born percurious—so it can't."

"That isn't true. You know that isn't true. You said yourself that Jack was dead."

Mrs. Surridge retreated. "Perhaps I made a blunder," she suggested.

"Now you are telling lies. But it does not matter. I can see now. Oh! I can see quite plainly. S-h-h-h! the wind is rising. Listen! Oh, Jack! Jack!" She broke off abruptly, and stood pointing into the darkness.

"Sit quiet, Susie, sit quiet—there's a dear," cried Mrs. Surridge in an access of fear.

"Look at the long wave rolling toward him. Oh! it is awful! He will be swamped. Jack—Jack! Auntie, can't you see?"

"A course I can see," she replied, simulating discovery.

"Of course you can—if only you know where to look. Any one could but first they must have been through the fires. See—how misty it has grown—and how the spray drives down the wind." She held up one hand as though searching for signs of a breeze. "Look!" she cried, "it is quite damp—and now I can't see him. Where is he? Jack! Jack!"

The cry came from the girl's heart as she stretched out her arms calling for her lover. Mrs. Surridge gripped her tightly round the waist. "Stay quiet!" she cried. "Maybe he'll come again."

Instantly the girl sat still. A solemn hush fell upon the room and for a space the harsh voice of the small American clock was the only note of unrest in all the lonely house. Susie reclined in her aunt's arms. For a moment she appeared to sleep; then, again alert and eager, she sprang upright.

"Shall I tell you how I know he is not dead?" she questioned.

Mrs. Surridge groaned. "La! yes—anything for a quiet life. Talk—maybe, it will give you repose."

"It all happened so long ago . . . it is difficult to remember. It was before we were married, and Jack and I had been down river. Then of course we had to come back . . . but the moon was up and Jack was tired of rowing,

So he took me in his arms and we drifted, just as we have drifted ever since . . . and all the time we came nearer a great swirl in the current a long way out at sea.

"Jack said it was the Gat . . . and that people die when they come there. But if they loved each other and were married they went past quite safely—but if they loved each other and there had been no time for a wedding . . . then they would be sucked down in the water. I didn't think that fair; do you? Because if there had not been time, you know it could not have been their fault. But of course we got by quite easily, for I had gone to sleep . . . and . . . and my husband was with me."

"Your husband, child!" Mrs. Surridge started at the words; but Susie continued with the calm insistence of one telling a history which was common to the world.

"Yes; didn't you know that we are married?"

Mrs. Surridge sighed as the girl sprang again to a sitting posture. "I could not forget such a thing, Auntie."

"No—women mostly remember marriage, one way or another, all the days of their lives."

Susie settled back in comfort and resumed with quick, nervous repetition. "No, no; I shall never forget. It was all so sweet . . . only the time was short—very short. They had turned me out; there was no where to go—besides the man was chasing me. Where could I go? Only to Jack—only to Jack.

"It was a good thing he was there," she continued after a slight pause, during which she had listened intently. "If he had not been there I don't know what I should have done. Gone mad or gone bad—mad—bad: which is it? Oh! how these things puzzle me . . . and my head is splitting. I can't think properly. Tell me—where ought a girl to go

when she is turned out and there has'nt been time for a proper wedding? Ought she to go to him? He is her husband, you know. God made him her husband—as He makes everything. No, that isn't right—He only allows it. Ha, ha, ha, ha," she broke into laughter, her voice thrilling weirdly. Then, suddenly, without a moment's pause, she started from her aunt's arms and ran to the window. Someone was approaching the cottage. She drummed on the glass, crying out: "Yes, dear, I knew you would come. I have been waiting so long . . . so long. Oh, Jack! my darling, don't stay away! Have mercy! Have mercy!"

Mrs. Surridge regained her side, and caught her round the waist. "Steady, Susie," she cried. "It isn't Jack—it's father an' uncle. Will you have 'em in to shame you?"

"I tell you it is Jack. He has been away so long that I nearly died. Let me see him! Let me see him! Jack! they are trying to keep me from you. Help! Help!"

She struggled violently in her aunt's arms. The two men were standing at the door beneath the window. In dread lest she should be overpowered, Mrs. Surridge thought of a means of calming her.

"Susie!" she cried. "Listen. I'm wrong. It's not father. It's Jack right enough. But you can't see him like this. Child, you've forgot your dress."

The lie sufficed. In an instant the girl was standing trying with trembling fingers to unbutton her cloak. Mrs. Surridge caught up the night-dress and handed it to her. "Put this on," she whispered, "put this on, and then we'll see Jack."

Susie's face flushed with pleasure. She gathered the dress in her hand and slipping it over her head, stood with pleading gesture struggling with the buttons. "Help me, help me," she begged. "I didn't think."

By the time their preparations were effected the men had entered and Susie was gazing expectantly at the door; watching, listening, swift to interpret sounds. "Why doesn't he come up? Why is he waiting?" she cried.

"If you'll stand still an' don't offer to move, I will go an' call him."

Mrs. Surridge went outside and held the door closed behind her on gaining her promise.

"George," she whispered over the bannisters; "come up here."

Sutcliffe mounted slowly. "What is it, sister?" he questioned.

"The gell's mad. There's no holdin' her. She thinks you're Jack Elliott—an' she wants to see you."

Sutcliffe took a sudden grip on the rail. "You've told her then?" he asked with grim brevity.

"Aye—she forced it out of me."

"Best have left it to me," he groaned, "a job like that."

"Steady, brother. God give you strength. Come in an' see her. Maybe it'll rouse her. S-h-h-! She's movin'."

Mrs. Surridge opened the door as she spoke and re-entered the room. And as Sutcliffe advanced from the landing Susie hurried toward him with outstretched hands. Her voice rang plaintively in the quiet house.

"Jack!" she whispered. "Jack, my darling, why have you been so long away?"

She paused faltering, uncertain, and staring with startled eyes—Sutcliffe was standing now in full light of the lamp. He waited in silence.

"You—are—not Jack," she breathed." You are not Jack. His hair was—dark; yours is white. He was tall and straight; you are—bent."

She broke off abruptly. A quiver ran through her frame. She clasped her hands across her eyes.

"Susie!" Sutcliffe cried with a deep sobbing breath. "My lil' Susie."

She took down her hands to gaze. Her lips quivered. She cried with passion: "They said you were Jack. Go away! Send Jack to me! Send him to me!"

"Lass—he's gone."

"Gone?"

The question fell with an awful insistence. She started forward, and seizing her father by the wrists, stared into his ashen face.

"Do you tell me he is gone," she whispered, "gone without one word—without one look—without one kiss? I don't believe it. He would never leave me so—never—never! Oh God! call him back to me—call him back!"

And the cord snapped. The girl broke into a passion of tears and fell at her father's feet begging for mercy.

Part IV

The Beginning of the End

CHAPTER I

Saunderson Moves

THE evening was closing in. Far away, behind the hills, the setting sun tinged the sky with streaks of gold and crimson; the woods lay in a bath of purple and the high elms, standing like sentinels beside the cottage, shivered as the cool wind swept down the valley.

Susie was sitting in her window seat. Some weeks had elapsed since she had been struck down by the torture of that night spent in Mrs. Surridge's room. During the early stages her life had trembled in the balance, she had been face to face with death; but nature had brought her, pale and wan, from the conflict. The girl who never before had known a day's illness, whose life had been spent in the free country air, who had delighted always in abundant exercise, early hours, and simple fare, was not easily cast down. But the factor which most aided her at this time has yet to be stated. Her mind was now at rest.

Jack was dead. There was no longer any room for dalliance with hope. Hope died in that terrible hour when Mrs. Surridge had explained. The certitude of his death, the precise statements she had heard, the letter she had written, now

treasured, water-stained beneath her pillow, left her no loophole by which she might presently escape; nothing remained but a commonplace surrender to the forces by which she was hemmed. And now she turned with redoubled affection towards that father who had tended her so faithfully through life. Her father needed her. Her father's future remained in her hands.

Time, rolling on leaden wheels, had seen many weary days and nights at the girl's bedside; the old man constant in his attention, jealous of his vigil. For the doctor, noting the effect of his quiet presence, had left him entirely master of the sick room, despite Mrs. Surridge's wish to take watch and watch with him.

And so, he was rewarded early one morning, "at low water," as he afterward explained: "by a voice from the bed, just a quiet whisper of a voice as wouldn't a been heard above the squawkin' of a block at sea.

"It come to me while I'm lookin' out of the window, thinkin' it's tide time an' the craft are all swung athwart Reach, lookin' for the flood to come up. Eh! it's a pretty sight at dawn, the river glintin' yellow, the lights winkin' dim, the ships all brimful of life, but so quiet; so near to death—just like my Susie—just like my Susie. Then her voice breaks in upon me—soft, so weary soft—'Father,'—nothin' more, an' I turned round.

"The ebb's done, you see; done this half hour, an' the flood's come up good an' strong. It's the springs, you'll remember; an' when they do come along, they bustle that sharp, that you have to spry wiv your hellum, as the sayin' is.

"Lawd! if I wasn't proud, knock me down for an old fool that isn't fit to have charge of a craft in any waters; but I couldn't say as much. You take my meanin'—a job like that?"

They had taken his meaning and given him a full share of praise, a thing he deprecated with a phrase. "As though a

man wanted sleep," he said, "when life's in the scales wiv time."

Now Sutcliffe had sailed. Some days before his departure Susie had attempted to discover whether her aunt's remarks as to his debts, had any basis in fact; but she had failed altogether to extort any proof. Her father had maintained a bantering demeanour, unutterably foreign to him, and the girl, reading between the lines with the quick instinct of womanly love and intuition, knew that her aunt had spoken the truth.

She had been sitting watching the sunset and wondering how she could best serve her father, when the cottage door opened and she heard her uncle scrubbing his shoes on the mat. Her own door was ajar, the passage outside, in semi-darkness. Tom paused on the threshold to ask, under his breath, "Where's Susie?"

Mrs. Surridge replied: "Upstairs, lyin' down."

"Asleep?"

"She was asleep when I looked in just now—what's wrong?"

"I've seen that Saundisson, an'——"

"Hush! come into the kitchen——"

Their whispers ascended the stairs; then her aunt's voice grew louder. It was evident the conversation waxed in interest. Susie moved from her nook in the window and leaned over the bannisters. Her name was mentioned coupled with Saunderson's as she crept downward.

"Saundisson claims the gell or the money," said Tom Surridge angrily. "I don't hold with such nigger's courtin'. It ain't manly."

"Susie mustn't wait about—she must be woke up," his wife retorted.

Surridge made no reply; he was evidently nonplussed at finding himself in antagonism with his wife.

"If George can't find the money," she resumed, "why don't he say so an' tell the gell of his trouble. I told her somethin' of it six weeks ago this blessed day—an'——"

"An' a nice muss you made of it, mother," Tom replied with a rare outburst. Susie could almost see her aunt's astonishment. She remained a moment listening, and the voice again took up its burden.

"You're as bad as George, Tom. La! why can't you let it alone—you men are all a fair image of each other; you don't understand gells any better than you can boil potatoes. Saundisson's a fine built man, an' unless I'm a mile out, Susie will be his wife before many weeks have passed—an' as comferable as a hen with a new brood of chicks."

Tom groaned, "I don't know. I don't like him."

"He's too big an' fine for your fancy, Tom," Mrs. Surridge laughed; "I can't remember you ever likin' a big man."

"I don't know about that; I do know as Saundisson's goin' to sell up. O law! My law!" He paused with a gasp as a light step sounded on the steps and Susie entered, saying in her still voice:

"What is he going to sell up, Uncle?"

She stood so quietly, with such white, drawn lips that Tom meditated an escape. He moved toward the door, muttering: "Who's sayin' anythin' about sellin' up? Seems to me you've been dreamin'—an' them pigs! O law! Hearken to Zulu—number four's gettin'——" he broke off in dismay; for Susie had intercepted his passage to the door, and now paused with her hand on the lock.

"Never mind Zulu," she said; "but tell me what Jim Saunderson is going to do?"

Tom looked at his wife; but that lady's lips were firmly closed. He could see no help in her eyes. It was useless to deny

any longer what he had said. The girl read him like a book. He drew near the table.

"Saundisson has got father in a hole," he blurted, "an' he's puttin' on the screw—twistin' him, same as you'd twist a cow's tail you wanted to hustle." Then amazed at his own effrontery, he gazed in astonishment at the calm lips putting a further question.

"Has he asked for the—money then?"

"Law! Susie, that's a trifle—a trifle. He says, 'pay me—or,' law . . . 'or I sell the house.'"

Susie took a long breath, but stood firm. "Where is Mother? Is she still there?" she questioned.

"He's turned her out. She's gone—but no one knows where she's gone. In Abbeyville they say Saundisson chucked her along of her behaviour to you, Susie."

Mrs. Surridge intervened with a sigh: "Ah! There's heart for you, Tom."

Tom snorted.

"That's what I call heart," his wife emphasised. "I doubt that if he had the power to squeeze her also, she would have been squeezed—an' all for the sake of——"

"Jim Saunderson may have done it for my sake, Auntie," Susie returned, "and he may have done it simply because Mother is no further use to him. I shall always be inclined to doubt Jim Saunderson's motives."

"Hear that, Mother? Law! isn't that what I say?" Tom cried in triumph. Mrs. Surridge took no notice of her husband; she turned to the girl.

"You are wrong," she said. "Why look how good he was when you were ill. Do you think a man's all bad as can act as he has?"

"No, I don't say that he has no good in him. We all have

a little good. Still, sometimes it is so hidden by the bad that it hardly appears. But," she turned to her uncle, "do you know when this—this sale is to take place? Have you heard anything?"

"It's threatened for the next time father's at home, Susie," Tom replied with some hesitation.

The girl took a deep breath. "Then we have a fortnight to—to find the money."

"That's it, Susie; to a hair it is."

"And need be in no hurry," Susie continued. "And—a fortnight is a long time. I shall write to—a friend of mine who may be able to help. So we will say nothing about it to anyone, please—and now we can have tea. I am so thirsty, Auntie, I could drink—oh, I don't know what I could drink."

Mrs. Surridge approached with persuasion written in every line of her comely face. She whispered: "Who is your friend, Susie? Is it Mr. Oakley? Is it?"

"No. I could not ask him now. Come let us have tea."

Tom waited to hear no more. He glanced shamedly into the girl's face, stared at his wife, and disappeared in the direction of the sties.

An hour later Susie was sitting again in her room gazing through the window. Twilight still lingered in the sou'west, a tinge only, very soft, very indefinite, blending with the light of the stronger moon. The pure, cold rays flooded the land and fell shivering through the panes, throwing elongated diamonds across the floor. Trembling patches of light, blurred and misty, mingled with the darker spaces shadowed by the walls; a naked arm of wistaria moved gently without, throwing unstable lines across the sill. The infinite peace and solemnity of the scene sank into the girl's heart. It led her away from the

weary episodes of recent days, bidding her remember what had been.

She grew strong and confident as she sat there staring into the subtle light. Thoughts came and went in silence. Without volition, without the smallest effort of will, the past swam down the stream of memory. She lived, as the old live, in the recollection of what had been, and the pictures came unasked.

Far through the night she perceived her room in the old home in Abbeyville, A pretty window, draped in white dimity, overlooked the river. It was dark out there, and the light on the Point blazed like a brazier, throwing recurrent flashes across her. A moment it was hidden: ah, a barge was crossing her line of vision; its sails shut out the glare.

Farther in the distance a double tier of lamps burned steadily; they shivered in the waters almost to the garden foot. Hark! A bugle call. "Lights out" on the training ship. The youngsters were going to bed. How beautiful it was; how full of peace that outlook in the home of her childhood. Downstairs, standing on the sofa in childish expectancy, she had waited for her father's arrival; outside, at the edge of the garden, in later years she had waited and watched for the first indication of the black-sailed brig, moving from the shadowy reaches beyond; the reaches from whence her father always came with treasures, and she had assumed the right to search his pockets in the full knowledge that treasures were there. In that old home she had received them; an infinite variety of keepsakes, all stored now, all unreachable, telling the story of a father's devotion and her increasing years.

Everything she loved was in that house. There were her pictures, her books, her trinkets. All he and she held dear was congregated within the four walls of the old weather-board

house where her father had suffered without a whisper of complaint during those years of her step-mother's reign. There he had lived, struggling in the meshes of growing debts and diminishing wages, for interminable years—for her sake. All for her sake. A weary task. An unending sacrifice. And now, when life was nearly spent, when he was drifting slowly with the ebbing tide, now, Saunderson stepped forward and said, "Pay me what you owe."

What could she do? How could she help. Compared with his great record, she could do but little in truth. Her future—she had no future. Jack was dead. It lay with her to save her father. In honour nothing else remained. Yet, how could she aid him?

By appealing to Saunderson's generosity?

As well appeal to the unending procession of stars and bid them wait her convenience; as well appeal to the rolling tide and beg mercy for some drowning wretch lying on sands already half submerged. For Saunderson knew no mercy, compassion, self-denial, nor any of the kindred virtues, and Susie was aware of it.

There was but one way in which she could be of service, one way in which she could rescue her father from the clutches of his enemy. It was the way practised by women in all ranks and grades of life—her surrender. Tom Surridge's words filled her ears: "Saunderson claims the gell or the money."

Terse, unutterably terse, but definite terms.

The night had grown in silence. A faint whisper rustled in the trees; the wistaria nodded and beckoned before the window. Far away in the distant valley an engine shrieked and the dull roar of a train droned sleepily in the stillness. A blackbird awakened from his sleep, flew to an uppermost bough and piped a dozen stanzas in antiphone with his mate. The peaceful moon

shining with the light of a dead world, peered through the deep-set window and glanced across the quiet room.

It searched amidst the white bed-wrappings; tinged the farther wall with a picture of waving branches, twigs, and clinging ivy, and fell lovingly on the figure of a young girl, kneeling with hidden face among the draperies at the bed-foot. And something of the ineffable purity of its glance was reflected in her suppliant attitude, as she paused there, bowed in silent prayer before the Throne of God.

CHAPTER II

Conditional

AGAIN some hours had sped; hours full of unrest; full of halting action, fear, hope; then the news of Saunderson's presence at Abbeyville came and Susie knew that she could delay no longer. In a sense she was glad that she knew; for action could take the place of inaction; decision of indecision. Sutcliffe was still away. It had become imperative that she should move at once, if she would effect his salvation. She was glad of the certainty, and for the moment, revelled in the knowledge that at length she could be of some service.

Early one afternoon, she started across country for Abbeyville. It was the first time she had ventured on those hallowed paths since Jack had gone. She knew the way blindfold. It was the hunting ground of her childhood; a way she had learned to tramp in many a ramble; the way she had traversed with her lover that night when he had accompanied her across the woods to Swinfleet. Then, as in those earlier days, Jack had been at her side to beguile the time with love and kisses. Now Jack was dead, and she moved in silence across a wintry land, a land peopled by memories, alone and in dread.

It was bitter to traverse it thus; bitter to recognise the cause of her loneliness; bitter to remember the errand that took her again to Abbeyville. She set her mind resolutely, determined to forget. Vain, all vain. Memory stood between her and oblivion. As well as attempt to stem the tide of Father Thames as to hush the voices whispering of what had been.

Here, by the cross-roads, barely four months ago, she had parted from her lover, and for the last time watched him out of sight. The last? Aye, for on that other occasion he had fled in the dead of the night; while a dense fog had curtained the land, and she lay dazed with the agony of his departure.

What an array of fateful incident jostled and surged about her. How monstrous the procession of stern events. Cheek by jowl with illness; cheek by jowl with death—all past—all done with, and only memory alive. It was hateful, torturing—a phantasy from which she could not escape.

She came to the woods, walking quickly down the winding, rutted way. Here, on the right, was the copse in which Jack had taken her in his arms and asked her to be his wife. That was long ago . . . long ago. There, at the verge of the clearing, the woman had intervened; they had turned back; she had grown tired; Jack had made a bed of leaves and sheltered her with his arms—long ago . . . long ago. There, in that gorse-strewn dell, they had talked and planned and dreamed of a transcendant future. Now Jack was dead—yet she remained, lingering sadly to aid her father.

Without his presence the world would soon have lacked hers. Without the recognition of his enduring faithfulness, no such ordeal would have been possible. Susie would have gone the way of many a sufferer. Quietly, without remorse, she would have entered the Silent Courts through the dark avenue she knew so well; but now that mode of freedom, paltry and jarring with a hateful cowardice, no longer existed. Her father lived. She stood in the gap between him and beggary; for, to him, and to all men of Sutcliffe's type, the "House" remains anathema.

This Susie knew only too well. She knew, too, that should he gain an inkling of her intention, he would prevent it. After

all, she argued, did it matter whom she married? Jack was dead. His death freed her to do as she willed. Other women had married men whom they hated—why not? It was in the nature of things that people could not always do as they wished —unless they were rich. Then it mattered very little what they did. She found herself wondering what would have been Mr. Oakley's attitude had she been rich. The question crossed her in so many ways; but always the answer remained steadfast: "In that case, he would have continued my friend."

She waited a long while sitting on a felled trunk near the pond at the Shorncombe end of the woods. The thoughts troubled her. The proximity of those well-remembered paths grew as a burden from which she could not escape. She was appalled at the trend of her fancies: Jack was dead. She was moving to save her father. Nothing else mattered.

It was growing dusk when she at length passed from the shady footway and entered on the long village streets. These she traversed without interruption, and striking down the highroad, came to a narrow turning, a footway leading to the river. A tortuous, railed-in path, along the verge of old chalk cuttings, took her to the bush-grown dell they called the Spinney—the place of all others, consecrated in her memory to Jack. She crossed the turf and stood a moment among the trees, and the trees spoke to her, bidding her welcome with sad, soft voices. Out there was the river. Beside her the bushes. Above her the voices. She flung herself at the foot of the trees, grovelling in the grass.

"It is mine! It is mine! Nobody must touch it—it was for me alone. See, here are the crosses he cut: those were for kisses. Here is my name—twined with his: that was for luck. This branch he broke away from yonder: it was for me to lean against. It is mine—mine—mine. Jack made it for me.

Now Jack is gone and I am alone. I do not want it. I can—never want it again.

"Oh! give me strength. God help me and teach me how to pray! When I was little I prayed for everything. Then mother came and I could pray no more. Now I cannot pray. I am miserable—heartbroken—fallen. I have done wrong. I have done nothing right and I am afraid . . . I am afraid of myself . . . and so I ask for help. Oh, God, give me strength—teach me what I must do."

Her voice echoed amidst the trees and the trees looked down through leafless arms, murmuring, cajoling, whispering of the one great certitude—death. She looked up, sobbing with the burden of a sorrow too heavy to be borne. She lay exhausted on the turf, staring out upon the winding river, and always the one answer came to her: the only certainty is death, there is no other—none.

The violence of her grief had brought exhaustion, but the night restored her. She rested after a time upon her arm, watching the familiar scene. The quiet solemnity of the still evening; the whispering, friendly trees, leaning out with that strange answer; the glinting river with its load of moving shipping, and her own desire for guidance, brought the relief she craved. She was less breathless, less excited, less fearful now. She sat a long while staring into the night, and the night soothed her as only Nature can soothe her children. The future faded from her vision. Just a short, and perhaps stormy, interval awaited her—then—— Something moved on the path close at hand. She stood up and the denial of that whispered answer, all unrecognised as it was, confronted her.

Tony Crow paused on the grass before her. Tony Crow the village blacksmith, the man of many inches and the heart of a little child—he bore the denial. He said in his strangely

mixed dialect: "Ah thowt ah saw sommat flutterin' abaht t'trees. Socks! ah'm praad t'see ye, lassie."

Susie shook indecision to the winds and advanced to meet him.

"I didn't notice you," she cried. "Have you been here long? I came over to—to look at the old place again. You see——"

"Then it's weel ah commed this way," he interrupted.

"Why?"

"Because you could na get in. Susie, the bums are in t'owd house. What is father doin'?"

She replied with scarcely a quaver: "That is curious, for I came over on purpose to arrange it. You see Father is away. Can you tell me where I can find Mr. Saunderson, Tony?"

"He's on t'sea-wall. Gone to look round t'*Bluebell*. He wull be comin' back presently ah knaw. Socks!" he added shuffling with his feet on the gravel, "but ah'm glad t'hear you c'n settle it. Ye may have perceivet thot ah have no great love for Saundisson—ah weesh ah had the power, if ah wud not bring him oop wi a rahnd turn—ah'm dommed, an' thot's Yerkshur. Gude nicht, lassie."

He disappeared down the path, his long legs moving swiftly, his arms swinging, his head erect and menacing. But Susie did not see. Indeed she scarcely heard his words, that other phrase, unspeakable and degrading, rang in her brain: "the bums are in the old house." Anger mastered her. For a while as she walked toward the river her thoughts were in tumult; but again the cool night air soothed her and she recognised the futility of battle, the uselessness of strife, the necessity for calm and unimpassioned thought. She reached the sea-wall and stood looking out into the dying afterglow.

How long she paused there, how long the pictures of her

past life flashed before her, she did not know. The only recognised fact was the heavy and irregular sound made by Saunderson as he advanced to meet her. Then his voice, with that curious, ringing tone, so thrilling and yet so hateful, fell on her ears: "Susie, I didn't think to see you here."

She approached the object of her visit at once: "Father is still away," she announced: "he was unable to come—and so ——"

"Father has never wanted to come, Susie, so far as I can make out," he broke in with a touch of anger.

"Don't say that—don't say that. He has had so much trouble—or he would have paid you."

"I won't disbelieve you," he replied with a tinge of sarcasm; "still he might have arranged to answer my letters."

"Your letters?"

"Several—all unanswered."

"Father is a poor scholar; he can't write well—or—read much." She faltered the fact as if in extenuation, but Saunderson pushed it aside with a brusque gesture. He said roughly:

"He might have shown em to those who can."

"You don't know him. Indeed, indeed you don't. He could not do that. He never tells strangers of his affairs."

"He need not have done that either," Saunderson returned, still with the tinge of sarcasm.

Susie paused; she knew they only fenced with words, and wished unutterably that he would say what he had to say—what she knew he would say, presently, when this fencing, this stupidity was over. She looked up and discovered his eyes were fixed upon her. He was holding out his hand—advancing to take hers. He was speaking also.

"Father might have shown them to you, Susie," he said

and reached her side. She watched him, and the question moved on her lips:

"And now it is too late?"

"It is too late unless—unless——"

"Well?"

"Unless you care to change your mind, maybe."

The girl was conscious of one thing during this dialogue. The suggestion was hers; the sentences were hers; but beyond yawned a gulf. She had no volition in the matter. The conversation went on the lines made inevitable by the man with whom she spoke. She turned towards him and again words fell from her lips:

"You know I would save him—if I could."

"Then you shall!" he nearly shouted.

She lifted her hand and he drew back as though ashamed of his vehemence.

"You know I do not love you . . . you know——"

"I know that I love you," he continued swiftly.

"That I love——" she essayed and paused.

"Never mind your love," he broke in with rough eloquence; "think of me. Think of the old man. Think of the smoothin' down of difficulties for all. Love! You needn't do much lovin'. I can do all that—I love you enough for forty. I love you so as no woman was ever loved before. I love you with a love that burns the soul-case out of me. I'm fair sick with longin', with waitin' an' playin' the fool. Come to me, Susie!" he moved a step nearer, speaking more softly, "come an' even if you don't love me, it makes no sort of difference. I love you—an' your love for me will come."

The girl shrank before the passion of his appeal. The words appalled her. She could not speak. She found his fingers gripping hers, drawing her to him and a sudden

lethargy overcame her. She found herself sinking in his arms.

"You are mine—mine," he whispered in her ear. "My Gawd, Susie, you are mine!"

His passion aroused her, she struggled violently for freedom, crying aloud her conditions. "Stay! You must prove yourself worthy of my trust—you must—you must! How dare you attempt to hold me! Stand back—or I will never speak to you again."

He released her instantly. He was stung by the quick hard tones; but still he watched her; still looked hungrily into her quivering face.

"What must I do?" he asked at length. "Tell me what I must do."

She faced him, striving to speak without hurry. "You have put some one in the old house. It was ungenerous; you must send them away—send them at once."

"If you wish it," he replied.

"You will give me a receipt for this—money?"

"I will, Susie—when you are mine."

"I will marry you. You promise never to make any further claim on him—you promise that before God?"

"Never, Susie—before Gawd I promise it. But it's on one condition, you understand that."

"I understand," she returned without a tremor; "that I am to be your wife."

"That's your promise?" he questioned, half in doubt.

"Yes."

"When—to-morrow?"

"That is impossible. You must give notice. The day after, if you wish—at the registry office in Riverton. You understand? and you will bring the—papers?"

"I will—I will."

"I told you that I do not love you—that I——"

He broke in with a swift sentence. "No matter."

"And you have heard about—about——" Susie paused, a sudden tremor filled her voice, and Saunderson picked up the phrase:

"About Jack Elliott? Of course I have."

"You know that I was driven from home—by my mother—and that——"

"Susie, I know all."

She pursued the subject with calm intonation; but with pulses that leaped and throbbed and burned: "And you would marry me—no matter what had happened——"

Again the hurried and passionate tones of the man overcame her own. He cried out with sudden vehemence: "I would marry you, Susie, if you told me you slept that night in the gutter. I'd marry you if you told me you're Elliott's wife. I'd marry you no matter what had been. Why? Because I love you—because I'm mad, a fool wiv longin'—fair dizzy wiv the strain of waitin'—so now you have me on the hip."

Susie shuddered involuntarily. Her face was ashen, her voice scarcely reached a whisper.

"I think," she said, "there is nothing more to speak of."

"Except—what time will you meet me in Riverton?"

"Eleven o'clock. Will that do?"

"It will do if you say so. Everything will do—only look at me an' say you're glad to be able to square this trouble; that you will come to love me with time; that you don't hate me now—say it, Susie."

She faced him, looking very white; her voice tremulous and full of tears: "I am glad——" she said, then halted.

"Jim," he suggested.

"I am glad we have been able to arrange it—and—but you will bring the papers. I shall not marry you until I have the papers."

"No further, lass?" he questioned, watching her closely; "can't get on with it any further—yet? Well . . . I'll bring the papers. I'll wait, Susie. I would do more than that to get your love. You understand me. You know there is nothin' I wouldn't do to get you—nothin'—nothin' on all God's earth. Come . . . kiss me . . . Susie; let us begin all over again."

She looked round helplessly, averting her face. "Oh! I can't," she begged. "Not yet—not yet."

He drew back with a touch of disappointment. "I'll wait," he said. Then suddenly broke out; "Susie, do you know what this means to me? Do you guess? No; you can't. But I'll tell you. It means strength—it means power—it means happiness. With you to help me I'll climb high. With your love to aid me my stumblin' block goes. I'm not educated as you are—we will work an' push forward. I will lead these sweated workers. I'll help them get their deserts—a fuller wage; a stronger position. The masters shall come to know there's somethin' in Win'bag Saunderson after all—and you will help me? Susie! say you will help me."

"I will try," she faltered.

"I ask no more," he replied.

CHAPTER III

Tom's Defence

IT WAS the morning of the sacrifice. The morning of the day named after the one-eyed god of Scandinavian mythology whose wisdom is proverbial—Wednesday, and the country lying under a pall of clouds which had shrouded the sky since sunrise.

Susie had been up for hours watching the falling rain and waiting to speak to her uncle. Tom Surridge usually journeyed to Riverton on Wednesday and on this occasion the girl was to accompany him. She had proferred her request so eagerly on the night she returned from Abbeyville, that Surridge, noting her white and pleading glance, promised to go, "come wet or fine." He had wondered in his simple and passive fashion what made her so earnest. But there his curiosity ended, for Susie had made him promise that he would not divulge her secret, and he, being mindful of another occasion, attempted nothing in the way of comfort. Thus, it was not until they were ready to start, that Mrs. Surridge was made cognisant of the intended trip.

She was instantly loud in her expression of the folly of all mankind, and her husband in particular, when presently Tom ventured to side with Susie. "Sakes! child, you'll catch your death," she asserted.

A wistful expression crept into the girl's eyes, but she smiled and moved towards the door. Mrs. Surridge recognised that her arguments had no weight. She shook her head sadly—

"Well, if you must go, put on a jacket under your rain cloak: you shan't go unless."

"Thanks, don't bother about me, Auntie—see, I am quite warm."

She held forth her hand, and Mrs. Surridge caught it in her own: "Some people," she remarked, "fair stagger a person with their onaccountable contrariness. If it's hot, you're like a blessed icicle; if it's cold and rainin' an' miserable as a wash'us with no winda, you're burnin' like the sun through a presim. Go along! Put on your coat—I have no patience with you."

Half an hour later Susie was seated beside her uncle and the trap was carrying them fast toward Riverton. The girl was strangely silent, and Tom, to make his abstraction less apparent, had found it necessary to bestow so many orders and flicks of the whip on the mare, that his patient servitor felt distinctly ill-used and resentful. By the time they reached the cross roads at the top of the hill Susie found courage to say:

"Will you be very busy to-day, Uncle? Could you put the horse up somewhere for an hour?"

Tom instantly forgot the worries of driving. "I can put her up if you want me to," he answered. "I can't say as I have a power o' work to do. What is it you want?"

"I am going to be married," she returned more distinctly.

Tom gulped with astonishment. He replaced the whip in its socket and rapped out crescendo variations of his most useful swear-word. "Law! Oh, law! My law!" Then with an incredible twist, "Married?"

"Yes—and I want you to help me."

"Susie, you're jokin'—surelie you're jokin'."

"Indeed, I'm not."

"Then—then you ought to be," Tom said this with huge deci-

sion; but reading in her eyes that this opinion carried no weight, he fell back on entreaty. "Why, where's father, an' auntie, an' the white dress an' fal-lals, Susie? Wheer's any of the things they have at a weddin'? An' who's it to be?"

"Jim Saunderson, Uncle."

"Susie, I'm goin' back. I can't listen to sech things. There would be ructions if I did. An' what my old woman, your auntie, my dear, would say, goodness onlie knows. Why, earthquakes, an' wars, an' sudden deaths would be a fool to it. Whoa, mare! Whoa!"

He checked the trap as he spoke and sat watching the girl's face. She half-rose, pushing aside the apron. "If you go back I shall walk," she said very distinctly. "Let me get down please."

"You can't walk, child—it's as wet as wet, an' we are more than two miles from Riverton."

She put her hand on his arm with a caressing gesture: "Then drive on—there's a good, kind uncle. I must go. I have promised. It will make no difference."

Tom Surridge groaned and gave the mare a cut that sent her onward with renewed vigour. "Of all the trapesin's I've ever been on," he remarked uncomfortably, "this is the licker. Why, what's the use of me at a weddin'? I don't know anythin' about weddin's. I've only been at one myself, as I know of, an' the old woman dragged me through that by the scruff, as you might say. Law! what's the use of havin' me? Why it's no use—you might as well have Zulu to see you straight as me."

"There will be nothing for you to do, except witness," she urged, "you can't refuse—you won't refuse."

"Refuse!" he cried in great perturbation, and again, "witness! Why, what do I know about witnessin' an' such?

Nuthin'. Less than nothin'. Wait a bit, my deary; don't you go an' make a blessed hash of it . . . an' what about the letters if they come?"

She faced him with cold decision. "No letters can come now; or, if they do, you must keep them."

He made no further remark. The girl's quiet insistence effectually silenced him. He held his peace as was his custom when worsted by the severer oratory of his wife.

It was but little short of eleven o'clock when the trap woke the echoes of the quiet, wide street in which is situated the Riverton registry office. As they approached, Saunderson emerged from the shelter of an adjoining archway and came to meet them. He was dressed in his most dazzling war-paint. A blue, braided, peak cap; a blue reefer suit, velvet collar and an elaborate vista of shirt front adorned his heavy frame. About his shoulders, as a protection from the inclement weather, hung a yellow oilskin coat. His face and beard dripped moisture and his bushy hair shone with oil and trickling rivulets of rain. He came forward and saluted Susie with a quick sentence, then turned toward the door of an adjacent bar. Here he engaged a room and ordered refreshments. They stood in a circle about the small table and Saunderson produced a bundle of papers.

"I brought them with me as promised. Look at them: bill o' sale, receipt, George Sutcliffe's paper given to me when he had the money, int'rest papers—all square an' regular. Turn them over, Susie; turn them over an' see if they are right."

She examined them with trembling fingers. They were her purchase money; the price of her father's liberty; the price of her beauty. In a few hours she would have redeemed them. She folded them slowly and handed them to her uncle.

"Yes," she answered. "They are what you promised: hadn't we better go?"

Saunderson moved over and took her hand. "You'll give me better thanks than that, Susie?" he whispered, drawing her to him. She submitted passively to his caresses, but the power of the man's arms frightened her. She drew back. Saunderson did not appear to notice the action. He was flushed. The vein in his forehead throbbed noticeably. So they passed over to the registry office, and in fifteen minutes Susie emerged, a bride of nineteen, leaning on the arm of a man whose years outnumbered hers by more than two to one.

Saunderson moved briskly down to the trap with the air of one on whom the world smiled. His eyes twinkled as he made ready to mount.

"Now," he said, "If Mr. Surridge will favour us with his company, he'll drive us down to the pier. I want you to look at the schooner—you've not seen her yet, Susie. I would like to show her."

Surridge discovered no enthusiasm in the matter. He was ill at ease and had no wish to examine the beauties of the *Bluebell;* but he desired to keep within reach of Susie, and consented. They drove in silence to the pier. Here Saunderson alighted and taking the girl in his arms, lifted her to the pavement and hailed a boat which seemed to have been waiting his orders. His voice rang with pride.

"Now, my sons," he cried "up alongside wiv her. Look slippy. It's almost high water. This way, Susie—hold on to me—come on. Uncle, there's a boy lookin' after the horse. This way—this way."

In ten minutes they were standing on board the schooner and Tom was staring at the flapping canvas. Presently he

approached Saunderson with a question which had gradually assumed shape:

"What's them things bangin' for? Why don't you tie 'em up?"

The skipper replied with a grim touch of humour: "Because we're goin' to use 'em." Then in a shout to the men forward: "Heave short there!"

Susie drew near. She understood by the orders and the noise forward, what was impending, and dared hope for further respite. "You are sailing, then," she whispered. "I didn't know; but, you will put us ashore first—you will give me time to get my things. It has been so hurried I could not bring them with me."

Saunderson caught her in his arms. "Never you mind about your things," he laughed, "we're goin' where there's things in plenty—an' the money to buy them is in my pocket."

Surridge turned on him with a flash: "It's not honest work. It's a cruel business; it's kidnappin'—that's what it is. Why, if I'd known what you were leadin' me to, I'd not have come. I'd have seen the lass dead first." He shouted the words as he danced on the deck, snapping his fingers in Saunderson's face, but the big man only laughed.

"Don't you make a song about nothin'. Susie's my wife, not yours," he cried.

Susie slipped over and laid her hand on Tom's arm. "Never mind me," she faltered, "it's only a little sooner than—I thought. Leave us: I am quite safe with Jim."

Tom Surridge pushed her back. "You hold your tongue!" he cried. "I'm not going ashore without you—I'll see him to —to——" He turned to Saunderson, shouting: "You're a big chap—an' I'm a little un. But I don't stand by an' see this. Let Susie come with me—let her come an' get her things."

"I'll see you in flames first."

"That settles it."

As Surridge said this he darted straight at his big opponent and aimed a blow at his head. Saunderson saw him coming and caught him under the ear before he could reach.

"Stand back, fool!" he shouted savagely; "d'ye think I'm to be stopped by a whipper-snapper like you? Lumme! I could kill you."

Surridge was lifted off his feet by the blow. He rolled across the deck half-stunned and leaned against the rigging; but in a moment he returned to the encounter. He shouted aloud his contempt.

"Whipper-snapper I may be—fool I may be; but, by law! I ain't a coward." He snatched an iron belaying pin from the rail. "If arms can't do it," he asserted, "maybe this here poker can."

He was under Saunderson's guard before the skipper realised what was to be the new mode of attack. "On the shins is a a good place for niggers!" he yelled, dancing briskly to and fro; "I shouldn't wonder if it's the best for you!" Two smart blows on the legs followed, then Saunderson landed a heavy thump on the little man's head.

"O law!" he gasped, jumping about and watching his opportunity to reach the skipper's arm, "O law! my crust is about as hard as the old woman's pies. O law! that ain't nothin'. How's that, eh, Guv'nur?" He brought the belaying pin down with crushing force, and Saunderson leaped back with a yell of pain. His arm dropped limp at his side. He stood feeling it, and Surridge paused in speechless concern. "You've got it," he remarked at length. "If this here poker ain't a beauty, I don't know. Come on, Susie." He was bleeding profusely from the blows he had received, but appeared

quite unconscious of his hurts. He was entirely occupied with the result of his strategy.

Saunderson's answer was terrible. One moment he danced in an agony of pain, then his eyes blazed. "It's broke!" he yelled, and a torrent of oaths fell. Then : " Take that ! Gawd! take that," he shouted, and Surridge lay at his feet insensible.

He turned to the crew with an angry roar: "Avast heav'in! Lay aft here an' get this drunken fool ashore! Get him ashore an' look slippy back. We're losin' the tide—we're losin' the tide."

The men knew Saunderson. They knew his strength, his violence if opposed, and consulting their own personal safety, did his bidding with the alacrity born of fear. Thus, in less than half an hour, the *Bluebell* was slipping quietly down Reach; moving amidst the tangled traffic under the eye of a skipper half drunk with pain and mortification; while Susie, a wife of scarcely an hour's standing, lay on the cabin settee, too dazed to know what was happening.

It was eloquent of the persistence, the dogged and bull-like obstinacy of this man, that although he was undoubtedly suffering intensely, he had no thought of then going ashore to see a doctor. To do so meant detention; the possible flight of Susie; any one of the many dangers he saw on the horizon of his fears. Undrilled, undisciplined, with the tags and headlines of modern newspapers to guide him; without self-control, without creed, without any of the old restraining influences; with wits sharpened by a staccato educational system and the voices of highly placed democrats as his tutors, he perceived only the necessity for movement; for a resolute persistence in the plan he had mapped out for his future. Nothing else would avail him. The *Bluebell* must sail. She must leave Riverton for many reasons.

Susie was his wife. Therefore he must sail. Bye and bye, he told himself, he would be able to land somewhere—meanwhile he must "grin and bear it." He had accomplished more difficult tasks in his life. He would accomplish this.

A few miles below Riverton stands one of the forts in the second line of Thames defence. A low granite circle, with grim, iron-studded masks, conceals the guns and men. A signal-man stood on the verge of the battery waving flags. Some of the garrison were out with their launch, laying mines. But Saunderson did not see her; he was occupied with the pressing details of his position, until a voice rang out close under the *Bluebell's* bows: "Hard a-starboard! hard over. Where the devil are you going?" Then as he glanced under the mainsail, he discovered the uniforms of the R. E's, and heard the officer shout, "Full speed astern, Quartermaster—both engines."

Saunderson jammed his wheel over and by the aid of the double evolution, the schooner scraped past without mishap. He crept down to leeward and hailed the officer in extenuation:

"I'm fair dizzy wiv pain, sir. I've broke my arm."

"Broken your arm, eh? Then get ashore and see the Medico. You are dangerous."

"At the battery, sir?"

"Aye."

"Right, sir—an' thankee." He turned to the men, addressing them in a series of shouts. "Let your fore yard run sharp up, Mate. Haul in on your port braces. Down jib an' light stay-s'ls. Stand by to down kellick."

Susie was seated in the cabin, listlessly cognisant of the ship-board turmoil, until the sound of running halliards and the rush of the cable awoke her. Then in a moment she moved to the companion-way and stood looking about.

The anchor was down. The wind flattened the sails against the masts. They clung black and rigid agaidst the spars and rigging, holding the vessel aslant with her head pointed toward the Essex shore. The Mate, with another, was holding a boat alongside and Saunderson stood on the rail near the short ladder. He caught Susie's glance and cried out cheerily that he was going ashore to see a doctor and would be back again in no time. Five minutes later the splash of oars told her they were gone.

She crept to the side and stood watching the vanishing boat. In the distance were other boats. Riverton loomed in a yellow and red haze, far on the horizon. A boy leaned over the bulwark forward. He was whistling "The Little Alabama Coon."

CHAPTER IV

The Sea-wall

THE news of Susie's marriage was echoed in Abbeyville within an hour of the *Bluebell's* departure. Mrs. Crow had been in Riverton on a shopping expedition and the lack of material for gossip had brought her into the waterside streets, where she espied the tokens of a mêlée outside a public house near the entrance to the pier.

This was altogether too obvious a chance of gaining knowledge of other people's affairs to be missed. She stepped within and was speedily put in possession of the facts by the battered Surridge, who told her what had happened and begged her to see her husband.

Mrs. Crow lost no time. She returned at once to the village and watered the streets with the news. Tony paused in the midst of his work and gazed at his wife who presently stood before him hot and flustered.

"Socks!" he cried. "Wha telled ye?"

"Tom Surridge hisself. He's beat so'thin' cruel—same a'most as if he'd bin hit wi a bloomin en*gine*."

"Gotten it bad then, Missis? Puir Tammas! Teddy—gude lad, drap t'tongs; shut oot t'fire. Ah'm finishet fer t'day."

He stood a moment in silence, struggling to think while the boy babbled incoherently the details of his work.

"Wheer's Sutcliffe?" he questioned at length. "Dost knaw whither *Tantalus* has come home?"

"Nay; she's at sea, Tony."

"Does t'owd man knaw Susie's wed t'yon sluckit skeeper?"

"No; he don't know no more than Adam."

"Then ah'm dommed if ah'm not left t'fix it masen."

With this enigmatical rejoinder he closed and locked the smithy door and accompanied by his wife went home to think it out. This operation was difficult of accomplishment. Anything in the form of mental argument was impossible with Tony Crow—he required assistance always. Indeed he would rather, any time, manipulate half a ton of red-hot metal, than consider for a dozen minutes. He gave voice to his ideas after cautiously shutting the door.

"When ah see Sutcliffe last, he said to me, 'Tony,' he says 'there's trouble in the wind—thou'lt look after t'lass whiles I'm awa.' An' I promiset. Noo she's wed—Missis, what will I be at?"

"It's a pecurious business, Tony—all through it is," Mrs. Crow returned sententiously; "him hav'in a shadda an' all."

The blacksmith sprang round with sudden energy: "Shadda, wumman! What shadda? Have ah been cacklin' in ma sleep, or wha telled ye of me suspeecions?"

"La! how you do jump down a person's throat. I don't know what you're drivin' at. Everybody knows what I speak of—there's no sort of secret about it. What do you mean—you an' your suspicions?"

Tony drew his hand across his forehead. He stared at his wife with dull eyes. "Socks! is thot aa'?" he exclaimed, then added after a short pause. "Noo, lissen. Ah'm goin' in t' Riverton t' find Susie an' t'find summat else. Nay, Missis ah'm sayin' no more, for ah don't want t'village abaht ma heels. Just you remember what ah said—ah'm goin' t'Riverton t'find Susie."

He had divested himself of his grimy apron and had donned

a less picturesque jacket; then, discovering there was sufficient time to catch a train, set off without more ado and in less than an hour was standing on the sea-wall below the town.

He had already interviewed the loungers who congregate about the piers at the waterside, and had tested the truth of the report. The *Tantalus* had not arrived, might not arrive for days, and the *Bluebell* had spread her wings and sailed soon after high water. He could do nothing as far as Susie was concerned. Had he been a man to whom money is no object, he might have chartered a tug and followed; but Tony Crow's resources were strictly meagre. He paid for his information in glasses of "four ale" and came down the sea-wall until he arrived at the place of Dunscombe's murder. Here he halted and commenced again to search for that trifle which hitherto he had not been able to find. Yet this was the third occasion on which he had been, as he termed it, "fossikin' abaht t'deetch seekin' eevidence."

He stood in the neighbourhood of the scene of Dunscombe's murder. The police had searched it. Many unofficial persons had searched it, scrambling about the banks, peering into the rushes, but nothing had transpired. Tony's heresy as to the value of police investigation was exemplified by his persistence. They were all "silly, feckless loons," in his estimation. The fact that they had issued a warrant for Elliott's arrest was sufficient proof, in his mind, of their arrant stupidity. He believed in none of their theories, because they were all bound in one terse sentence—Jack Elliott.

Tony knew that Elliott had not done this thing. He knew it vaguely, as a dog knows it will get some meat if it sits and begs; but the faculty of reason was as conspicuously absent in the one case as in the other. Hence he had been "fossiking," and, so far, had gained no information.

He groaned sorrowfully as he climbed again to the sea-wall. His fruitless attempt to rescue Susie stung him. He knew the old man so well; knew that he trusted him, and would have walked into any species of danger to do the girl a service; for he, in common with many others, was aware of the trouble that had crept into Sutcliffe's life since his second marriage, and of the old man's unutterable folly in borrowing of Saunderson to meet his wife's extravagance. He knew, too, of Saunderson's fierce love for the girl, and how it had run unchecked by the fact that she was affianced to Elliott.

He recollected his meeting with Susie that night in the park; how queerly she had spoken; how unlike she had been to the blithe lassie he had known for years. He cursed his glib tongue for having given her information of Saunderson's whereabouts. He might have known that trouble would come of it; for he knew Saunderson as few others in that circle knew him.

He stood a moment resting on a curious implement, a self-wrought tool which he had used in his fruitless "fossiking," when a short laugh brought him suddenly to attention. A tall, dark-eyed woman, with a mop of frowsy, straw-coloured hair, stood on the river side of the embankment, watching him. She climbed the pathway and spoke with a quiet air of conscious superiority.

"You are Mr. Crow, the Abbeyville blacksmith," she said. "The people call you Tony Crow—and they say you are a man who wouldn't hurt a fly."

The blacksmith stared; a twinkle came into his small eyes as he took in the situation. "Ah'm aal ye say, Missis—except thot ah don't knaw abaht t'flee if ah coomed under ma hammer."

"And in that case, Mr. Crow?" she laughed.

"In thot case—ah doot it would be smashet."

Again the woman laughed; then looking him straight in the

face she said: "You are certainly explicit, for a man. Cha! why do I waste time. You know the *Bluebell*—you know Saunderson: perhaps you can tell me why the *Bluebell* is anchored down yonder, by the fort."

Tony stared down the Reach, following the woman's finger. He looked up again; she no longer smiled, but watched him with a settled frown. He stammered: "T' *Bluebell* anchored? Nay, it seems t'me, ye knaw more abaht it than ah do masen. Maybe ye knaw Susie, an' t'owd man Sutcliffe; maybe if ye telled me a sma' bit abaht your'sen, ah could be more expleecit."

She faced him with an imploring gesture: "If you will answer my question, and aid me in discovering what I have so long missed, I will tell you who I am."

"Nay, fair play's a jewel. Ah'm clean oot o' t'runnin'. Maybe ye'll be askin' me why Susie took oop wi' yon sluckit skeeper—why Tammas Surritch came hame wi a bashet eye—why——"

The woman turned on him with a sharp question: "What skipper?"

"Skeeper o' t'*Bluebell*—Saundisson——"

"Saunderson! Susie! What do you mean?"

Tony relapsed into silence. He was flabbergasted; his wits were a chaos. "What for should ah tell ye?" he questioned.

"Oh! you will, you will." The woman broke into a wail of anguish; she held out her hands begging him to speak. "See! it is most important that I should know. Cha! it is important also for this—this girl—Susie, as you call her. See! I have traced him here. Months ago I should have found him, but a man I met told me he had gone north, to the Tyne, and I have wasted time and money trying to find him there. Now I come back and I hear he has sailed. I have found out several things

about him; but he has sailed—and I must wait. But he shall not go free; he is mine—he shall not go free!"

Tony was aghast at the sudden transition; he waited in some trepidation, then broke out; "Steady, Missis! There's so'thin' adreeft—ah can see thot plain. Maybe if ye would begin at the beginnin' an' go on, loike, we would come at summat."

"Begin at the beginning! Man, that would take a week. Tell me, what is this Susie—to Saunderson?"

"His wife since noon."

"His wife. I am his wife."

Tony leaped forward hoarse with excitement. "Well ah'm dommed," he shouted. "Then it's beegamy."

Mrs. Saunderson laughed viciously. "May she have as nice a time as I had," she returned.

"Nay Missis, thot's not pretty talk. Ye don't mean it. It's jealously thot makes ye talk like thot. T'lass is as pure as the angels—pure as the hooly angels, get t'next fra where yew will."

But she took no heed; she was moving to and fro stamping her feet and gesticulating as the words fell from her lips.

"Why should I interfere? Have I not suffered enough? Have I not borne enough? Did he treat me kindly? Did his love last? His love! God forgive me for so degrading the word. Love? Passion, blind, overwhelming, unreasoning passion. He tired of me quickly—be sure of that. And now he has won this Susie of yours, you would have me interfere. I can't interfere. I won't—why should I? I won't, and why should I?"

"Steady, Missis!" Tony cried again. "Think it oot. Thot's no your'sen thot's talkin'—thot's——"

She interrupted with a movement of disdain. "Man, don't I know him? Am I not his wife? Psha! seven years ago I

knew him. I was Lilly Barker then, and I married him down in dear old Plymouth. He deserted me when my child was born. I have not seen him since; but recently my father died and left me some money, so I made up my mind to find him . . . for he is my husband, you see, and I thought to get him to take me back—for I loved him. Money sometimes helps as you know; but now I find him with another love—a chit of a girl. Well, let him tire of her as he tired of me; let him break her freshness, as he has broken mine—then, perhaps he may be less unwilling to come back to the wife he deserted—and to her money."

Tony held up his hand begging for consideration: "Steady, Missis," he cried; "ye've got it straight—ah can see thot. But, suppose t'lass don't love your husband. Suppose she's stole fra her man, an' wed against her will. Suppose aal this, Missis—an' than, dom ma een, ye'll step in wi Tony an' save her?"

"Explain—explain. I don't understand," she cried.

"Eexplain! Eigh! thot's easy. We're coomin' to it—noo we're beginnin' t'fetch Saundisson's sluckit neck under ma hammer. See—Susie was t'have been wed three months agone; but Saundisson draws his line across t'bargain. Dunscombe was murdered—ye may have heard oo't. Ye did—gude; then Susie's man is blamet—an' he runs like a foo', an' Saundisson puts t'bums in Sutcliffe's house at Abbeyville. Sutcliffe is t'lass's father. T'save him Susie promised t'wed Saundisson. She was marriet t'day an' t'papers t'owd man gave when he borrowit o' Saundisson were handed to puir Tammas. Thot's how it stands—an' ah'm goin' dahn t'fetch t'lass back hame fra t'*Bluebell*."

A great deal of this speech was incomprehensible to the woman in her excited condition. Jealousy, too, struggled

hard for supremacy. She faced him with thin, unbelieving lips: "Will you swear she never, never angled for him or made love to him? Will you swear it?"

"Nay, Missis. It's no case for swearin'. There's Tony Crow's word—take it or leave it."

"I prefer not to believe it; it is impossible."

"Nay, there's nowt impossible."

"Then I cannot help you, if you like that better," she returned with an ugly laugh.

Tony moved toward the path, preparing to go: "Noo, we're coomin' at it—noo there's no banes aboot it; an', if ye've no objection, Missis, ah'll just say how yon deceession o' yours looks t'me. It's puir selfishness, an' obstreperousness; nothin' else, foreby a smaa' touch o' jealousy. An' ah say thot the wumman thot will stand by, an' see a lass taen t'her death, is na wumman but a child—an' she should be treated loike a child wi'a simple spankin'—an' thot, Missis, is more Yerkshire."

He turned on his heel without further ado and walked swiftly down the sea-wall to the Garter Pier. Here he paused a moment and glanced round as though he still expected the woman to be following. But she remained where he had left her; silhouetted boldly against the skyline. Tony concluded that she intended to abide by her decision, and having hailed a boat and bargained for speed, he clambered into the stern sheets and started at once for the *Bluebell*.

CHAPTER V

The Sluckit-Sasser

FROM the Garter Pier to the fort off which the *Bluebell* lay is a distance of three miles; and, viewed in the light of Tony's horror of the water, it was no easy task he had set himself. His education at the forge of a Yorkshire smithy had not given him the faculty of balance necessary for jumping about in rowing boats. In this matter his feelings were something akin to those of "puir Tammas," they differed only in the form. Surridge was concerned chiefly with the feckless blundering which resulted so often in collisions; Tony, with the instability of everything afloat, and the danger he saw of his own great height tempting a boat to turn turtle.

Hence he sat crouched low in the shallow wherry and kept a nervous and constant watch from beneath his drawn-down cap on every babbling wavelet crossing their track. Tony Crow seated in a boat in mortal fear of being capsized, and Tony Crow holding a kicking horse to be shod outside the smithy doors, were distinctly separate individuals.

But despite his fears, they flashed rapidly down the tide and "in a quarter less than no time," as he observed afterwards, they were close to the anchored vessel. She lay head to wind, tugging restlessly at her cable, her black sails whanging in the breeze.

Arrived alongside, Tony grasped one of the shrouds and clambered to his feet. His head was level with the rail. He appeared curiously uncertain how to proceed. Then the sight

of Susie hurrying to meet him, brought him up the side with the quaint action of a big retriever, and as though he feared his weight would bring the schooner over. He landed on deck and wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

"Socks!" he exclaimed; "ah would not be a sailor-man, not for dumps. Ah loike summat undah ma feet thot will-na go ricketty-rock—for aal the world loike a babby's cradle. Where's Saundisson?"

Susie stood before him in obvious wonderment. She cried out nervously; "What is it, Tony? Why are you here? What do you want with my husband?"

Tony gasped for breath. "He's no your husband, lass," he blurted, and again mopped his face.

The girl stared. She remained a moment without speech, then, tapping with her foot on the deck: "What do you mean? tell me what you mean?"

"What do't sound loike, lass?"

"Tony, Tony!" she reiterated sharply; "tell me what you mean, I—I have a right to know." Again the foot stamping angrily on the planks.

The blacksmith watched her with a miserable attempt at jocularity. "Eigh! t' cur'us ways o' wimmen," he cried. "T'hear 'em talk, wi' tears in their een—tears at their heart—an' a life o' tears before them—t'hear 'em struggle in t'meshes, strivin' t'defend their man, when there's just no defence at aa! Eigh! it's just peetifu'—peetifu'." The girl writhed under the sting of his words and he went on more slowly: "Ah coomed down here in yon sluckit-sasser [boat] t' tell ye what ah've heard—an' t'see your man. Ah telled ye, Susie, plain Yerkshire, Saundisson is no your husband. An' ah thowt maybe ye'd got a bit love left fer yon vanishet chap o' yours—Jack, Susie. Dom ma een! There! Sho!"

Tony Crow started across the deck in great perturbation; for Susie was weeping bitterly, and Tony had that in his heart which comes to strong men in place of tears, and wanted space wherein to vent it.

The sound of approaching oars struck them as they stood thus. Susie dried her eyes and crossed to where the blacksmith leaned against the fiferail. "I hate Saunderson," she cried under her breath; and again, "I hate him."

"Socks! Thot's ma Susie, noo."

"And I love Jack. Oh, Tony, can't you understand?"

"Ah can—ah can," He caught her hand, wringing it in triumph. "Leave it t' me. Yon's Saundisson comin'—do as ah bid you when t'time comes."

Silence ensued. In the silence a boat drew alongside and Saunderson's head appeared above the gangway. He saw the blacksmith instantly and his face grew livid. His arm was in splints, hanging from his neck in a sling. He crossed the deck to meet them, growling out: "You'd best get ashore. I've lost enough time wiv one sort o' foolin' an' another—you'd best leave."

"Ah've no detained ye, Cap'n," Tony returned with studied politeness. "Ah want just a sma' bit talk wiv ye, then ah'm done."

Saunderson halted beside them, striving ineffectually to read their faces.

"Well," he suggested, "get a long wiv it. I'm losing the tide."

"Ye've marriet Susie the morn?"

"I have—an' got my arm broke since."

"Thot's bad. Maybe ye telled her you were wed before?"

Saunderson floundered with words. He plucked at his neckerchief with a hand that twitched, facing them, staring into

their eyes, frowning—miserably incompetent as an actor. He shouted fiercely: "What in flames d'ye mean? What is it to you if a man was married before—if his wife's dead? My wife is dead: what more do you want?"

"Your wife is no dead, Jeames Saundisson."

"You lie. I say you lie!" he reiterated.

"Steady, Cap'n. Fer a corpse ah conseeder her weel preservet."

He interjected again: "Lie! lie!" and stood to listen.

"Tall, Cap'n. Fluffity hair, summat loike straw in colour."

Saunderson struggled vainly with speech; he stammered, but Tony Crow, masterful and very strong in the possession of facts, continued his indictment.

"Wumman o' abaht thirty—more or less; queer bluey een, wi a bit sparkle in 'em when she's vexet."

Still no reply and Saunderson gazing dully at Susie.

"Met her up by t'deetch, wheer Dunscombe coom oot wrong end first. Sittin' in t'grass, watchin' t'*Bluebell*—lookin' fer her husband—thot's wheer she was, Cap'n."

The skipper made an attempt at bluster; but he could only repeat in a thin voice: "I say it's a lie—a lie from one end to another." Then with sudden violence: "Lumme! you shouldn't stand there sayin' what you are, if I was master of my second arm. Get ashore. I'm losin' the tide."

Tony Crow approached speaking with grim emphasis: "Ah'm game to meet ye, Cap'n, when t'other arm is in its place; but, whiles you're in t' shop,* tongues will have t' do dooty instead. Yon wumman's your wife—marriet in Plymouth seven year agone. Name o' Leely—Leely Barker."

Saunderson was white with passion, but he controlled himself to shout: "Go on—go on."

*Engineering term for under repairs.

"Deserted six year, Cap'n; treated cruel; deserted wi a baby in arms an' never seen since. Dom ma een! is aa t'yarn a lee?"

Saunderson moved his lips to speak; he passed his hand across his face and found it wet. He stared into his palm and dried it on his coat. Something must be said; something efficacious; something pertinent. A cry fell on his ears and he looked up. Susie had given utterance to that cry. He moved towards her holding forth his hand; intent on exculpation; intent on gaining her sympathy—yet he only said: "I thought she was dead; they told me she was dead. I never loved her. Gawd help me! I never loved her. Do you believe me? Do you believe me?"

"I don't know what to believe. Oh! it is horrible."

Again a pause while Saunderson gazed with intense longing into her face and remembered that if this was true, the end of all things was at hand; that Susie could be his no more.

"Lass!" he cried piteously, "I don't believe it. I have the proof of her death. I know she died. Gawd love you, will you not take my word against—this—this——"

He stumbled in his speech and the oath died in his throat, at the sight of her mute appeal.

"Can you prove it?" she cried aloud. She looked directly into his face, waiting in tearless misery for his answer. But the answer halted and Tony Crow broke in without remorse.

"Coom," he cried. "Yonder she stands t'speak for hersen."

Saunderson put him aside with a motion of contempt. "Pish! Seven years ago I married Lilly Barker. But she died—as I'm a livin' soul, she died."

"Desertet, Cap'n—wi' a babby in arms."

"She's dead!" he shouted in anger.

"A matter o' deescription, Cap'n; but it don't get awa wi the livin' wumman on t' bank."

Saunderson moved across to the scuttle and covered his face with one hand. He was weak with pain and dazed by the rapid course of the morning's events. He had won. Some hours ago, he had won. Susie was his wife. She was ready at last to stay with him. He had won—and now, in the hour of his triumph, that other woman whom he had never loved; that woman, draggle-tailed and with miserable eyes, whom he believed to be dead, had returned, and he was—— No, it could not be—it could not be; yet the news bore the impress of truth. Truth! Chks! it was—what was it? He looked up and caught Susie's tearful glance. The sight fevered him and again he sprang to his feet hoping against hope; battling with dread; praying for respite.

"Susie! Susie! you'll not take sides against me. You'll stay by me now an' let them prove their words—you'll not make a fool of me before my hands. Gawd love you, I've treated you fair an' square. I know nothin' of what this man says. I did all I promised in that business of the house. I did it because you asked me; because I love you; because I love no other.

"Susie!" he went on passionately, his face a dull crimson and the pulse in his forehead throbbing and articulate, "I never loved another. I love you; you are my wife. Trust me —I didn't know I had another—I swear it."

She turned to him with a quick movement. "Will you come ashore and see—this woman?"

"I can't. I daren't. If the guv'nor happens to hear of all this delay, I'm done."

"Then I must," Susie returned.

"Don't—Gawd love you, don't make a fool of me. Trust me till we come back. Trust me till then."

He looked straight into her eyes, his voice ringing with pathos. He moved forward begging for consideration and the influence he exercised would have done its work had not Tony interfered with a sharp reminder of the position.

"Don't you be a foo', Lass!" he threw out. "Get ashore an' let t'beaks settle it."

"Yes," she replied. "That will be the best way."

They moved to the gangway. Saunderson followed plucking at the neckerchief he wore, shouting with annoyance, passionate, humiliated, and threatening reprisals on Tony Crow.

"I'll be even wiv you! S'elp me! I'll be even wiv you. Interfering—playing the goat wiv lies an'——" he broke off, and the sentence died in a spatter of oaths as he watched them climbing the rail.

The blacksmith made haste with his charge and gingerly following her, took a seat in the boat. He spoke with an assurance he did not feel as he remarked: "Noo, Susie, ye're weel out o' thot mess. So set firm an' don't get skearet; fer if there's one thing ah'm in doot abaht, it's puddlin' arahnd in a sluckit-sasser o' this descreeption. Ah ca' it fair temptin' o' Proveedence—nowt else."

And on the schooner's deck Saunderson moved with twitching muscles, going toward his cabin. "It's the curse," he announced grimly quiet. "Gawd give me time."

CHAPTER VI

Tooth and Nail

THE river swirled beneath leaden skies. Clouds charged to the zenith, leaping from the horizon in dusky shapes, grim, fantastic, blurring the landscape. They loomed grandly over a world inexplicably pestered by blinding squalls of hail and sleet. The wind moaned with the voice of a complaining legion. It swept over the shivering Essex marshes shouting and vengeful; telling, in gusts, in sudden shrieks, and whirling onslaughts, of its triumph farther east, farther north, where no coast line sheltered sluggard craft and the gulls could skim no longer. It struck the water, and the water smoked; the leaping waves were shorn of their crests; a seething spume ran blindly downward, hissing, twisting, clipped of its might.

The river swirled onward. It rolled seaward, carrying on its bosom the grime and filth of a thousand gutters. Like a turgid torrent, swollen, dim, and very vast, it moved toward the portals of the great estuary; swollen, lashed, and hugely masterful it passed down the dim Reaches and met its mother—crying as a child cries, with pain; moaning as an infant moans, searching for rest.

The afternoon waned.

Here and away the breath of far-off steamers hung in dusky blotches about the horizon; here, under the low hills sheltering Mucking Bight, a group of small fry lay with folded wings and bowed rigging, watching the turmoil; far down Sea Reach a few black-sailed barges leaped the combing seas; for the rest the

waters were bare of sails. Night approached—a wild night, full of presage; crammed with tokens a child might read. A fiery gleam escaped the charging clouds. The river took up the challenge and ran in strips of blood. A light appeared smirking solemnly amidst the gloom; about it clamoured the gulls; about it, too, rose a column of spray, white, scintillating, tinged with rainbow hues. It marked the edge of the sands, bobbing gravely. Beyond was chaos.

The *Bluebell* moved in mid-channel. She heeled with her lee rail awash. One man was shadowed amidst the sprays forward—a dim and fantastic figure clad in gleaming oilskins; another lounged at the wheel.

A ray of light, circular and very intense, marked the binnacle. The glare fell on Saunderson, lighting his face, lighting the moving spokes, tinging the folds of his coat with touches of fire. Beyond, the shadows grew blacker, more intense, and the track, so luminous and angry with movement under the stern, trailed off into nothingness.

Saunderson was at the schooner's wheel, steering with one hand; the other was hidden beneath the folds of his oilskin. He had stood thus, almost without relief, since they got under way off the Forts. Once or twice he had shouted for the mate and gone below to renew his vigour with the aid of rum. And so, by the time the *Bluebell* had reached the Chapman, he had worked himself into that reckless, devil-may-care attitude, which is so productive of disaster on the crowded river and ocean highways.

He did not see the matter from this point of view. He saw himself, rather, in the light of a man cheated of his rights; deluded, humiliated, maligned. His pride had suffered the severest conceivable blow. He had told the mate that he was about to be married and that his wife would accompany him.

The mate had met him, and he, with those other grinning chysers, had witnessed Tom Surridge's attempt; had seen the fight and subsequent trouble, and had held aloof.

He cursed them all, Tom Surridge, the mate, the crew, and Tony Crow; but most of all he cursed his wife, that ancient flame of his, whom he had only won by marriage, years ago in Plymouth. He saw himself, in his mind's eye, again at the Western seaport, and, following the shadows of the past, pictured the hilly country where he had wooed her. Now he was in the woods behind old Barker's farm; now on the Hoe listening to the band and praying for quiet. How difficult it had been to win her; what obstacles he had surmounted. Old Barker! Chks! he was a fool. Suspicions—desires for another match—a man of the sea. They had forced his hand. He had married her without love—married her of sheer pique. Then came those months of degradation, so he termed it now, a growing hatred of the tie he had formed, and, his charter accomplished, the opportunity to sneak away and find distraction in other fields.

Distance brought oblivion. Lilly Barker died. He swore it. Holding grimly to the wheel and staring at the elusive Lubber's Point,* he swore it. Thereafter all remembrance of her vanished. He had found other pleasures, newer loves, less persistent tongues; but this time, and the next, and the next, all through a bewildering chaos of faces he had carefully avoided the binding ties of marriage.

All these had passed as the swallows pass with the approach of winter. All these had sunk as a stricken ship sinks beside the rocks which have ground out her soul. All these had vanished, now in misery, now in suffering, now to form other

*A line set vertically within the compass to mark the position of the ship's head.

friendships, and he had swum triumphant down the stream of passion until, once more, he came to his old surroundings; the county of his birth, and fought his way to the position of skipper under Dunscombe.

Here fate had smiled on his growing madness for the fair daughter of poor George Sutcliffe; here fate had dallied with him pausing, beckoning, urging, until he was completely immeshed in the new labyrinth; and here, after succumbing a second time to marriage, while the cup of joy was at his lips, the blow had fallen. Someone had said that his wife, the woman with the haggard eyes, who pined always for a return of the endearments of her early wedded life, had come back—that she searched for him.

He stood at the wheel cursing grimly. No other man would have attempted the task he had set himself; few would have been physically competent. But Saunderson was inured to hardship from infancy; his muscles were like iron; his nerve, in all except one phase, adamant.

A squall which had been growing to windward now burst on the hard-pressed schooner. The skipper luffed with the precision of an old-time yachtsman, and brought her to the wind, her canvas roaring. Far up in the night blocks clanged, booms leaped, shackles jingled. A deluge smote them; rain, hail, spray, stung the slanting decks. But Saunderson took these matters as part of the general turmoil in which he had become involved; and as though Nature strove to sympathise and condole with him on his sombre outlook. He glanced up and shouted unmoved:

"Down tawps'l! Clew up and make it fast."

The loosened sail flapped with the roar of thunder. Two hands, flattened and fantastic, stole from the sheerpole, climbed the rigging, footed the ropes, smothered it, and crept back.

The squall hummed far in the solitude of the Kentish hills, uprooting trees, removing loose tiles, bothering the cattle; but Saunderson had returned to the pictures of his past, a phantom procession moving slowly in his brain.

He was standing on the *Bluebell's* deck listening to Micky Doolan's meandering history of the Gat. A calm reigned. He saw it, marked the oily heave of the swell, heard the monotonous slatting of the sails; watched that cloud bank rising over the Maplins tinged with flickering points of light which flashed and died as loose powder flashes and dies, noiseless, inscrutable.

Now he fought with Elliott on the *Stormy Petrel's* deck. He was winning. He would have won; but there came a lurch coincident with a blow and he tripped—tripped, and Elliott won instead. Paltry! Unthinkable. The result of that asinine collision of his for which he suffered.

What did Elliott want down there anyway? Was the Gat a place wherein a man should go fooling about—looking for derelicts? No; he swore it. His voice rose to a shout. Any man would keep out of the Gat who knew it's cursed—— Aye, but Elliott did not know. And now he was in the shadow of it—down the cellar, where all vanished who saw what he had seen. Gawd! He faced the blackness, drinking in the moisture which trickled down his cheeks. He faced it whimpering, acknowledging that he was hemmed.

Again he leaned over the wheel searching the binnacle. The Lubber's Point swam ridiculously buoyant. It evaded his custody. It refused to obey his desires. Chks! the sails guided him, towering in the darkness, round and intensely sombre. He asked himself why had these incidents happened; to what end had he given out that Elliott was down the cellar; to what end had he married Susie, committed bigamy, and brought himself

within reach of the law? The answer echoed remorselessly in his brain.

A silent cabin; a stifling and intense weight of fear; the loneliness of a man who acknowledged a force he could not comprehend. A vision of the courts and a weeping, middle-aged woman forever pressing at his heels. This, when he had counted on Susie's love and aid; this, when he had so generously foregone Sutcliffe's debt; this, and the triumph of Tony Crow and all the clacking busybodies.

A shout echoed above the turmoil, snapping his thoughts like a slammed door:

"See that steamer, Skipper?"

Saunderson had seen nothing for some time beyond the motley puppet procession which thronged his brain. He left the wheel and gazed under the foot of the mainsail.

A flashing vista of lights, tier upon tier, pierced the darkness, crossing obliquely the schooner's track. Saunderson returned to the helm and swiftly put it down. He hailed the watch with a shout, masterful, supremely alert: "Ready about!" And again: "Is our light burning?"

A voice swept up with the spray: "Na-a—gone out. Boy's trimmin' it."

"Then blow your horn!"

A few wheezy gasps struggled into being. A snort, as of anger, broke from the steamer's whistle. Then, as the *Bluebell* turned on her heel, while the canvas roared in the gale, the lights grew swiftly blinding. High above the paltry schooner they pierced the blackness, staring with an eye of supreme disdain; overlooking her, pointing her disorder. Blocks stood out, sails appeared where no sails had been. They fluttered helplessly; ropes dangled; the wet decks shone under a shower of silver spray. A voice shouted: "Schooner ahoy!

What vessel is that? Why the devil are you without lights?" Other remarks, less complimentary, less pertinent, followed—then a touch, a lurch—sliding, swift, almost an escape, and the steamer swept by.

Saunderson smiled grimly. His mood matched his environment. Peril? Chks! He seized the binnacle lamp and flashed it on the bow and growled her name: "The *Londoner*—goin' like a torpedo boat in the thick of the traffic. Lumme! I'd slow you down if I had my way."

The steamer's engines were churning the water into a millrace. She moved astern at full speed. Her crew were preparing to lower a boat. Again a voice rose: "Any damage skipper? Want assistance?"

Saunderson, smarting under fancied injuries, blind to his own iniquities, shouted truculently into the void. "Na! To hell wiv you an' your assistance! Why can't you keep your eyes skinned? I want no help from the likes——"

The schooner filled on the starboard tack. She heeled over, careening toward the black Essex shores and hissed out of sight. Saunderson's eye fell on the crew huddled in group to leeward. He roared at the mate, bidding him take the wheel while he and others examined the damaged gear.

"Keep your luff!" he ordered. "Don't let her fall rampin' full—till I see how the strings will stand."

He moved away, fumbling with one hand, staring at the splintered rail, manœuvring his men with the judgment of one born to command. With the aid of a few knots and some shortened spans the rigging was made trustworthy. The damage had been trifling. Indeed in the reflected light of his misery, it appeared a paltry business; a thing too inconsiderable to require mention. He returned to the wheel, giving his orders with a snap.

"Ready about. Down jib while we're in the wind! Snug your main tawps'l on the cap. Make it fast." He put the helm over and shouted. "Hard a-lee!" then stood watching the flare on Chapman Head as the *Bluebell* bowed the seas swinging towards the open Channel.

The canvas roared. Booms whanged, sheets jerked. The men's voices, whimpering in a long drawn minor howl, sounded amidst the clatter—then, after a space, silence; the comparative silence of a gale swishing high overhead; booming in the rounded canvas, twanging on the tight wire shrouds. The silence of a weather shore and Saunderson again occupied with his puppets.

His thoughts rested on Susie. A few nights ago he had held her in his arms and she had promised to be his wife; had promised to help him in that struggle for fame which was with him a passion only second in intensity to that he held for her. Now Susie was lost to him; another woman had usurped her place. Could that other woman aid him? No she could not aid him—he had no love for her. He recognised that her manner annoyed him—that she fawned upon him like a sick snake. If she had returned—if she had returned, he must endure it. Must. He was very certain on that point. He reiterated the fact with a semi-drunken gravity that matched to mimicry the profound and implacable gloom of the night. Must. He looked into the compass and said aloud, "Must!" then halted as other questions clamoured. Could he climb with her at his elbow? Could he reach that dizzy Eldorado which appealed so wonderfully to his imagination, with her? Could he? And what about the law courts? If she had returned it was bigamy? If? He knew she had returned. The likeness sketched by Tony Crow stuck in his mental vision: "Tall, fluffity yellow hair, blue een wi' a bit sparkle when

she's vexit"; he knew that description. Knew it. Must abide by the consequences. Must—must. The knowledge was purgatory.

His thoughts whirled like the spindriff slashing over the weather rail to sting his face; they whirled, criss-cross, far out of reach, leading him to heights he could not scale; to depths he dared not plumb. He swayed at his post. His head swam. His arm gave him pain. Chks! a pull at the rum bottle put him on his feet. He steered with one hand.

Far ahead, glimmering faintly amidst the shadows brooding over Southend, a signal flashed; then a train of sparks followed by a shower of coloured lights fell in symmetrical curves through the night. But Saunderson did not see it.

There are moment's in all men's lives when every detail is worthy of consideration; when, if the grip is relaxed in the smallest degree, by the most insignificant trifle, that trifle is sufficient to spell ruin. Saunderson had arrived at this moment. By slow and tortuous stages he had arrived at that point when every outside circumstance required his watchful care—if he would win. But, shrewd as he was, he had not the wit to know it. He could see his hand; he could see the binnacle, he could see the deck at his feet; but beyond was nothingness, vacuity, shadowed by a fate which made havoc of men's lives and against which it was useless to fight.

Had he seen that signal he would have known that a heavy and inadequately manned collier, whose owners are a byword for cheese-paring, was blundering up river, and he would have kept himself ready for eventualities. But the man had lost all sense of danger. The rum bottle was an illusive fillip; in its train were shadows more sombre, more stupifying than those he battled. He stood at the wheel steering carelessly, his thoughts centred on himself, his plans, and Susie.

The wind moaned. Another squall was flaring to the zenith. The clouds raced past a bleary vacancy where the young moon sank like a dim sickle, low in the west. Sometimes the sails fluttered and roared; sometimes they bellied full and round with only the hum of tension and the pattering fall of reef-points to mark the steady drone of the gale.

The mate and two of the watch consulted. Under other circumstances they would have been in bed; but Saunderson's navigation effectually kept sleep from their eyes. The schooner raced to windward—a blow on the bluff of the bow sounded and the spray drenched them where they stood.

"She'll be aback," said the mate.

"He's takin' the hull bloomin' river fer his bloomin' course," the third hand asserted in a dreary monotone.

The mate took the bit in his teeth. The crew straggled aft in a body to expostulate. A man before the mast experiences sufficient hardship, sufficient discomfort, sufficient of all unpalatable things on God's earth at the hands of niggard owners—for that is his birthright; it is written on his articles. But this was rank and premeditated suicide. Saunderson was drunk of two sources—excitement and rum. The men knew only of the rum.

Hence, when, after an interminable period occupied in a persistent chase of the elusive Lubber's Point, Saunderson became aware that the schooner was yawing horribly, he put the helm down, discarded once more the compass, and stood gravely regarding the sleeping canvas—canvas that hummed with the roll of drums. Saunderson's eyes fell. They took in the group of the three, standing in the shadow of the mainsail.

"What d'ye want?" he yelled with sudden passion. "Get for'ud! Get on the lookout!"

The men hung fire. Indecision had them by the shoulders and Saunderson swore with consummate fluency, until his eyes fell on the racing compass card and the wheel buzzed. Something smote the schooner broad on the bow. A sea—green, tempestuous—spitting at the mainsail. Swis-s-sh! It passed to leeward. The squall broke over them.

The *Bluebell* lay down to it, burying her lee rail to the hatch coamings. She leaped at the angry waters as a steeplechaser leaps at the hedges and ditches spanning his path. A sheet parted. The chain tied a dozen knots about the sheave-hole and a sail whanged, somewhere—high in the blackness. Saunderson struggled with the wheel, easing it down with knee and one hand, gripping the spokes; luffing—hugely determined.

"Let go jib an' stay-s'l halliards. Let go—snug 'em down!" He shouted the order unabashed at the fury of the buzzing wind. He added: "Down wiv 'em, my sons. Lively's the word."

The mate faced him, truculent of aspect. "No man can cross that deck," he announced. "They should a bin in afore."

"For'ud an' get 'em in now."

"For'ud yerself."

The skipper watched with ponderous gravity. "There's only one word that puts that into English," he said; "it's 'mutiny.'"

"You're drunk, Skipper."

The schooner heeled again. In the argument Saunderson had forgotten the wheel. The sails were full; bellying black against the sky. The mainsail stooping thirstily caught the water as with a scoop and poured it forth like a cascade. Skipper and mate both gripped the wheel. They moved the spokes tenderly, as a surgeon handles a hurt, edging down the helm.

They strove to bring the vessel gently to the wind, but before the compass had swung three points an ominous crack sounded high aloft—the foretopmast trembled, lurched, leaned out, and clattered to the deck.

"Ease off your booms! Down peaks!"

Somebody moved to obey. The foresheet whizzed; the main refused. In a moment the schooner rushed up into the wind's eye with all her blocks and canvas thundering. The mate made a trumpet of his hands.

"Hard up! Hard up!" he shouted. "She'll be in irons with this tide under her bow. Stand back, Skipper—give me hold."

Saunderson argued. He pointed truculently at the fallen spars: "Clear away—wreck!" he growled, "clear away, an' be damned!" Then again a voice leaped—insistent, ringing the tale of a new hazard.

"Ahoy! Ahoy! See that steamer?"

A man climbed to leeward and peered under the draggled mainsail. "Where away?" he yelled.

"Clost abeam!"

The mate saw. He moved towards the rigging shouting: "All up! She's done. Aft, my sons—out boat."

The voices mingled in a shout: "Steamer ahoy! ahoy! Hard a-starboard—hard over!" they spoke very clearly, very concisely; with the strained passion of men whose lives were in the balance.

The squall had spent its fury; the gale garnered its forces under Leigh hills, fetching breath for further effort. The disabled schooner hung in the wind, her head drooping, her sails shivering. As a horse, finding himself riderless on the outskirts of a fight stands whinnying for his master, so the *Bluebell* hung faltering, trembling, and in fear.

The men engaged in launching the boat looked up. Within fifty yards two dim lights winked in the blinding rain; a red blotch and a green; high overhead a faint smudge swung in the fork where in well-ordered vessels a mast-head light burns. In five minutes, unless they could lower the boat, the whole crew would be in "Kingdom Come."

"Out knives—cut her away. See the plug's in. Oars? Two of 'em. Bailer? Gawd! its' nowhere. Painter for'ud —out wi' her! Hell! look slippy."

A sound like the rustle of a thousand tons of straw grew into the night. The steamer moved out of the murk—a ponderous thing throwing a wave. She butted. A sea leaped the schooner's deck, and the men thrown from their feet, spluttered; holding hazardously to ropes. Some one swore loudly in a thin falsetto. Then, amidst a hail of falling gear and the noise of splintered woodwork, the steamer drew astern.

And with her movement came the end. For some the end of all things, the "Kingdom Come" of the river; for others a more protracted fate.

Still the river swirled madly beneath leaden skies.

Part V

Saunderson Leads

CHAPTER I

The Prophecy of Old Moore

DUSK was falling on the picturesque village by the river when a cart clattered noisily across the wharf and drew up before the smithy door. Tony Crow, hearing the sound of wheels and scenting a job, came quickly forward. "Socks!" he exclaimed as a man sprang to the ground and moved to meet him, "Socks, if it ain't Micky Doolan 'an ah thowt maybe t'were a bruken tire."

Micky gripped him by the arm, excitement written large in every feature. "Whisht!" he cried. "Have ye heard the news?"

The blacksmith slapped his thigh and rolled a warning look at his friend. "News," he said, "is loike the papers—made oop o' lies wi a jorum o' detail ta gie it the semblance o' truth. Ah never trust news, an' ah take sma' heed o' clack."

He turned oracularly to face the small boy who stood blinking before the forge. "Teddy!" he cried, "ah heerd t'factry horn blowed this five minutes. Ah don't want to be haulet oop under t'act. Scoot! Shop's shut."

The boy found his jacket and departed winking monstrously.

"That boy," said Tony when they were alone and he had closed the door, "is late fra t'Boord Schule. He'd worm a

secret oot o' a dommed axle-tree an' sell it fer cigarettes. Noo, Micky, oot wi't."

The two men drew together in the red glow of a fire which still leaped and spluttered under bellows slowly becoming exhausted. Micky produced a paper and stood holding it in hand.

"Ut's the curse," he announced with the solemnity of one who sees that he has prophesied correctly. "I told him how ut would be an' now she's dhown the cellar—ye mark that?"

"Doon t'cellar—wha's putten awa noo?"

"The *Bluebell*, my son—the *Bluebell* an' all her crew."

"Socks!" Tony Crow ejaculated standing unmoved, "t'*Bluebell*—art sure, mon? Sure?"

"Listhen," Micky returned and began to turn his paper—

"A message from Port Victoria," he remarked in parenthesis. "I copied ut from a telegraft lyin' in the Scorcher's office. Ut's this:

" 'Schooner *Bluebell* of Riverton, official number 56784, sunk in collision with steamer unknown, east of Chapman. Fate of crew uncertain. Some if not all drowned. Further particulars later.' "

The blacksmith took the paper and holding it gingerly with an unsoiled corner of his apron, examined it before the fire. "Well, ah'm dommed!" he remarked at length and punched an unoffending thigh.

He looked up at Micky Doolan as though he expected some further statement, but the Irishman was moving about the smithy jubilant and bent only on advertising the degree of accuracy he had attained in prophecy, and as though in some measure he was responsible for the strange fact of fulfilment.

"Ut wass bound to come," he cried out, "ut followed quoit

natural—quoit. Bill Jeffries, ye'll remember, wass the first to coil dhown his ropes. Ut happened as we came up river from the Gat—off Thames Haven. Seems he got jammed in the gear or wass thryin' to save the cat; but annyway he got pretty nigh cut in half before we could move to help him. He's wan —the first—but ut's a beginnin'.

"There followed Jem Walters, the cook, ye'll moind, who wass knocked overboard when the *Deerstalker* gibed in a breeze off Margate.

"Nothin' in that, ye'll say. A common enough happenin'. Good. But ye'll moind that Jem Walters wass in the *Bluebell* too that night in the Gat. Well, he's quiet now an' will shpoil no man's grub this soide av Kingdom Come. Two, my son," he announced, and stood a moment eyeing the blacksmith's gaunt form, looking through him with the gravity of a seer.

"An' now there's this," he went on, suddenly marching to emphasise his opinion. "The *Bluebell's* down the cellar an' her crew are in Kingdom Come. Ye moind that? Well, Saunderson wass skipper av the *Bluebell* that noight in the Gat, an' now he's dhown the cellar—three. Three ye moind within a spatterin' of months, an' yet they say——

"Arroo! arroo! If I could get since into their heads. If I could get them to look at ut square. If I could make them see wid my eyes in a manner of shpakin' I'd——"

"Socks!" said Tony Crow with sudden energy, "you've gotten a bee in yer bonnet, ma mon. Aal the crew's not gone. T'paper says so. Bide a wee. Dinnot gae so fast. Ah doot Win'bag's no the man ta gae anywheer wi' oot a fecht. Wha telled ye he's doon t'cellar?"

"Who? No one. But I know, I know."

"Man," said the blacksmith with a large emphasis, "ye knaw too much or too leetle—ah'm no sure which. But, if it's

no odds, ah'll wait till ah see Win'bag's corpse afore ah admeet he's a deed un.

"Also, Mike Doolan," he proceeded in slow commentary on the position as it appeared to him, "it seems t'me ye stand in some peeril yoursel'. Ah've heard you were on t'*Bluebell*—likewise thot you were mate."

Micky Doolan accepted the position at once. "Thrue bill," he said, "I wass."

"Weel," the blacksmith suggested, "ah'm no gaein' t' prophecy; but ah'd be carefu'—verra carefu' wi' them sluckit-sassers ah see ye bashin' arahnd in. Seems t'me it don't want a curse t'get a mon turnit into fish-meat these times—ner a blessin' neither. Therefore——"

"Arrah! give ut a rest," Micky Doolan interjected. "I know whhat I know, an' I know we're goin' to see soights we never thought to see if Win'bag's not dhown the cellar. Fer if," he threw out, negligently twisting a thumb to indicate Riverton, "if there's anny truth in a whisper I heard beyant . . . Elliott's on his way back—an'——"

"Elliott!" the blacksmith shouted standing threateningly over this spinner of yarns which appeared to fall true. "Gae on—gae on!"

"Nay; if you take it like that, I'm done," said the Irishman.

He turned on his heel advertising an annoyance he scarcely felt. "But if," he added, "you care to prove my words, get out an' see Tom Surridge—maybe he won't tell yez anny lies."

"Tom Surridge?" Tony Crow ejaculated, still very red and resentful.

"Aye; he's drivin' in from Riverton to meet yez—with the letters. See?"

He moved from the smithy door, crossed the street and got

himself into the Southern Trader. The landlord welcomed him with the enthusiasm of one who perceives a customer who guarantees the production of clack.

. . . . . .

For some minutes the blacksmith considered the information thrust thus enigmatically upon him; then he, too, passed out into the village street and made towards the Riverton road.

If there was any truth in Micky Doolan's statements it was evident that he might expect to meet Tom Surridge at any moment. He decided as he trudged slowly up Slave Alley that it was very necessary to meet; essential, in point of fact, if he were to carry out that trust of his with regard to Susie.

He came to the cross roads and stood peering into the dark. A cart or two lumbered heavily by, then came the sound of a trotting horse and the noise of iron-tired wheels. "Tom Surridge for money," said the blacksmith, and stood to intercept him.

The little man would have driven past if Tony had permitted it, but at the sound of that big, bass voice the horse was on his haunches and Tom crying excitedly:

"Tony Crow, as I'm alive! Get up, man. Get up. I were comin' for you—by law! I were comin' for you."

The blacksmith mounted and drew the apron about him. "Weel," he said, "thot's strange; fer ah were comin' t' you, masen."

"Luck!" said Tom Surridge, busy turning into the Northdean and Swinfleet Lane.

"Mike Doolan," Tony decided, grim of attitude.

"An' he's told you about the letter?"

"Trust him."

Surridge fumbled in his pocket and passed it to his friend:

"It's from Elliott right enough—Elliott who were given out to be down the cellar. What d'ye make o' that, Tony?"

The blacksmith took the envelope gingerly between finger and thumb and held it to the lamp.

"What d'ye make of it?" Surridge demanded again.

"Dom ma een!" said Tony Crow emphatically punching the thing in his palm, "an' thot's Yerkshur," he added as though explanation had been necessary.

Surridge shuffled on the high seat beside him and flicked at the mare. "O law! O law!" he cried. "To think as that letter should 'a come a'ter all."

"If you was to swear, Tammas," said Tony Crow, "t'ud do ye a power o' gude."

"Maybe; but I'm thinkin' it mought result in a habit, an' swearin' is the wunnerfullest thing fer puttin' my old woman's back up as ever was. Talk about cats! Why arched backs ain't in it. It's a matter o' spinal diseage—that's what it is."

"Tammas," said the blacksmith, "ah'm coomin' t' Swinfleet. Ah've gotten a word t' say t' Susie."

It was quite dark when at length they drew rein before the old-world cottage at the back of Swinfleet village. Tom had been anxiously expected both by Susie and his wife. The latter rushed without ceremony to the door at the sound of his coming and was immediately doleful at the plight of her spouse.

"Sakes alive!" she cried, "if you ain't chilled to the blessed bone an' in for prelature rhumatics, I don't know. Come in, Tom—where have you bin? What? Mr. Crow, too—Tony Crow I do declare. Come in both of you an' get your hands warm. It's as cold as a blessed church with the roof off. Take your uncle's coat, Susie—there's a dear."

Tom walked into the passage beside the girl. His air was important; his eyes curiously shy of meeting hers. He slid up

to her, speaking solemnly. "Susie," he whispered, "I've got so'thin' to say to you."

Susie halted. The fact of Tony's appearance and the lateness of the hour had already made their mark. She looked up with quick intuition. "There's no further trouble, is there?" she questioned.

"No—no trouble. Only joy this time. Why—what d'ye want most of all on this here hearth, Susie?" He made the signal relative to the receipt of a letter.

"Nonsense," she faltered.

"True as gospel, Susie."

The girl faced him, white to the lips. It seemed that she was about to faint.

"Pluck up," he begged. "It's from foreign—it's all right. O law! harken to them pigs."

He drew the letter cautiously from his pocket and thrusting it within her hand made for the door. "Read it," he urged. "O law! he's all right; it's from foreign. Bless us an' keep us! there's Zulu goin' for number four—givin' her hopscotch, she is. Read it upstairs."

He vanished at once, perturbation showing in every line of his kindly face as he went on a fancied errand to the sties. Mrs. Surridge entered the kitchen a moment later and discovered the blacksmith standing before the fire alone. She cried out, scandalised at the fact: "Sakes alive! Where's Tom an' Susie? Why what has took the man out there now?" The sound of hoggish welcome had announced the fact of Tom's occupation.

"If that man ain't a fair miracle," she decided, "I don't know. Why—what's the trouble, Tony?"

"Nay, Missis, there's no trouble," said Tony as he rubbed his hands before the blaze.

"Tom don't go pig soothin' unless," Mrs. Surridge announced emphatically. Then glancing about, "An' where in the name of all blessed prophets is Susie?"

Tony chuckled.

"Ah doot it's yon letter thot's done it," he said.

"What letter?"

"T' letter Tammas bringet fra Elliott."

Mrs. Surridge leaned forward in absolute dismay.

"A letter—from Elliott?" she gasped.

"Thot's it, Missis. T' a nail it is."

Mrs. Surridge gathered up her skirts preparing to depart. She turned to the blacksmith with a set expression of disquietude "Old Moore's right," she asserted. "Wars an' rumours of wars; danger to a crow-ned head an' trouble in the ager-i-culteral districts. If this ain't the trouble he speaks of—I don't know."

CHAPTER II

Tony Produces His Link

TONY CROW and Tom Surridge stood with their backs to the fire, smoking pipes, with the air of men on whom the world weighed heavily. They were silent. Their hands were pocketed. They stared at the blue fumes moving spirally up there amidst the beams and hooks and sides of bacon. It seemed necessary to watch something, so they watched the smoke.

For perhaps fifteen minutes they remained engrossed; then Mrs. Surridge whisked into the kitchen and silence gave place to sound.

"To think," said the lady with a dolorous inflection, "to think as that letter has come too late by a handful of days!"

The two men regarded her with solemn eyes; but they made no comment. Mrs. Surridge took their silence in the light of an affront and stumbled headlong into an account of what had passed.

"I went up to find Susie," she announced, "an' there she is leanin' out o' winda, searchin' the sky for rays of comfort.

" 'Rays there may be,' I said, 'but they're all mixed up with rhumatics an' the like out there—come in!' An' I took her by the solders, an' shut the winda.

" 'Susie,' I says, 'take heart, my deary, take heart— there's a pretty.' And she slid into my arms like a babby lookin' for the breast, an'—— Sho! Tom, stand quiet—there's a man; and don't look as though you wanted to eat me."

"I never moved," Surridge asserted with an injured air.

"No; but you might have moved. You've got no more synthapy than a tomato, for all you look so red."

Tom strayed across and put his hand on his wife's shoulder. "How's the lass?" he questioned. "How do she take it?"

Mrs. Surridge fell into his arms and wept for some minutes without audible response. At length she looked up.

"The blessed child's frettin' her soul to fritters," she decided, taking up the cudgels anew, "an' who's to wonder at it? Not I, Tom, nor you, Mr. Crow, I'm sure. Well, there old Moore's right. There *is* trouble in the ager-i-culteral districts, an' much good may it do him."

Surridge glanced appealingly at his friend, but meeting with no encouragement turned once more to his wife.

"An' what about this letter, Missis? Do it say anything?" he questioned.

Mrs. Surridge threw her arms about his neck, administering a caress to hide her emotion.

"Say!" she exclaimed, "it says a many things; it's pages long an' it tells of all that happened after he took an' run." She broke away and continued energetically, ticking off the points on the fingers of her left hand:

"First he took the Garter Pier boat—as was said. Then he hooked a steamer and clumb on board. Then comes an accident—as was said. His boat is smashed in half; but him, bein' on board the steamer, takes no harm. Then the steamer people finds him an' they put him in irons on the bridge—handcuffs, Tom— an' Susie never a bit the wiser. So there he stands, like Cazebianker, until another steamer comes sneakin' out o' the fog an' hits them so as they all have to swim for their blessed lives."

"Swim?" Surridge ejaculated as his wife paused for breath, "Where did he swim to?"

"To a ship that took him to South Amelica—three months on the voyage—an' never a chance of sendin' his letter. An' now he's on one of them Pacific boats comin' home quick as snails after rain. An'what are you goin' to do about it?"

Again she halted, breathless and agitated of mien; then having in a measure regained her composure, she looked at Tom, and sighed.

"What are you goin' to do about it? That's what I want to know."

Tom watched Tony Crow.

"It's a ke-nundrum," he asserted and fell into silence.

"It's aa thot," Tony acquiesced, following suit.

"Eh! Tom," Mrs. Surridge broke out, a reminiscence of what she had read rushing in, "it's a good letter—a letter with a heart, an' I must say you never writ me the like; but there, you never had to fly for your life on your blessed wedding day, as Jack had, which makes all the diffalence."

Mrs. Surridge sighed, so also did Tom. "There won't be no chance o' sleep," he averred, "not fer a month o' Sundays."

His wife seemed to divine his thoughts: "It's enough to undermile her institution," she said, "the way you let that girl be worried. I wonder at you; indeed I do."

"What could I do?" Tom questioned pertinently.

"What did you drive her into Riverton for—an' marry her to a person old enough to be her father, without so much as a woman of her own sect to see her straight? I would have seen Saundisson dead and in his blessed coffin with the grass growin' green on top of him first."

"I couldn't do more than I did, Mother. Why what could I do? She said if I didn't drive her she'd walk: so what could I

do? Besides," he continued, gaining confidence in the knowledge of Tony's presence; "as far as I can mind, you always were for her marrying Saundisson. 'A fine figure of a man,' says you. 'I don't like him,' says I. 'I don't mind you ever likin' a big man, Tom,' says you, an' there I left it."

Mrs. Surridge turned to view him. She took in his parts critically and they struck her as being incomplete. "Tom," she said; "I always said that you had a diseage, an' that their name is deaf an' stoopid. I ask Mr. Crow: What do you think of a man as would let a gell go away with—sakes alive! I can't name him—an' him with a wife, or maybe two wives in diffalent parts of the country, an' likely as not a family to keep in each. I ask you, Tony, for I know you won't lie."

"Nay, Missis," said the blacksmith with his great laugh; "I don't know thot ah'm qualified t'geeve ye an answer. Wimmin's curus cattle t'handle; ye never know where to have them. Ah'm no sayin' owt against 'em, or Susie, ye'll mind; but on t'whole ah would not hanker after t'job."

"But the gell's married, an' here's Saundisson with another wife," Mrs. Surridge expostulated. "What are you goin' to do about that?"

Tony Crow apparently had no idea, so she turned once more to her husband, speaking sarcastically.

"Tom, you're on the Cauncel,* an' know all about the law an' such. What happens to a man that marries two women both of them livin' at the same time? An' what happens to the gell, number two, that is?"

Tom thrust his fingers through his hair, regarding her with grave anxiety. "Don't ast me," he blurted; then with a sudden inspiration: "Why, she gets quit of him, I reckon."

Mrs. Surridge laughed. "You're a pretty Cauncellor!"

*The village council.

she cried. "No wonder folks say the rates have riz. Why, how do you do your business?"

"Take the tip from them as know, or ast the clerk," Tom answered glibly.

"An' who's the clerk?"

"Mr. Sherren."

"T'lawyer man?" Tony interjected.

"Aye; he's a lawyer right enough."

"Then wi' your permission, Missis, we'll take a run rahnd an' see him. Strike t'iron whiles it's hot, Tammas; thot's ma motta. It's no his office, or his hours; but ah've often worket overtime fer him, an' ah'm thinkin' he'll not take it amiss if we look him up. Come on." He linked his arms with Surridge and dragged him away.

An hour later they returned from their conference and found Mrs. Surridge busily engaged preparing supper and Susie helping gaily. Tony crossed over and took the girl's hand.

"Ah'm glod t'see ye," he remarked. "Noo listen: we've catched oor hare an' we're goin' to eat him. Tammas! oot wi yon paper." He rubbed his hands jubilantly and took a seat. Surridge pulled an envelope from his pocket, opening it with shaking fingers.

"We ast him," he explained, "to put it down so that it would be clearer. So he writ it. Susie, it's all right; it's as right as seven peas in a pod."

"How?"

"Read it—read it," he answered. "It's for you—an' Mr. Sherren says, 'Bring the gell to my office to-morra an' we'll see what can be done.' So to-morra you'll have to jaunt as far as Riverton."

Susie took the paper, and opening it read aloud:

"'A man by marrying another woman while his first wife is

alive, commits bigamy, and is liable to prosecution and penal servitude for not exceeding seven years, and not less than three years, with, or without, hard labour; unless his first wife had been continually absent from him for the space of seven years before the date of his second marriage, and he did not know that his first wife was living.'"

"Hot for Saundisson!" cried Tom rubbing his hands. "Law! I wouldn't be in Saundisson's shoes for money."

"Haud on, Tammas! Wait fer t'ither part. Socks! thot's wheer Susie gets t'pull o' Saundisson—by t' skeen of her teeth," he added *sotto voce.*

Susie continued breathlessly: " 'The position of the woman who married him when his first wife was living is as follows:

" ' The marriage . . . so far as she is concerned . . . would be a nullity—and void.' "

Tony interjected, "Meanin' you're no married at aa, Lass—think on 't!"

Susie glanced over and resumed: " 'She would be . . . at . . . liberty—to marry—who and when she pleased . . . and . . . by so doing . . . she would not commit . . . any offence . . . against the law.' Oh, Auntie!"

Mrs. Surridge caught her in her arms, patting her back. "That," she asserted, "is what I call a clear prescription. Puddles in the road couldn't be clearer—not though you've walked through 'em," she added reflectively. She moved across the kitchen and placed a hot pie on the table. "Come along—it's gettin' cold. Cold pastry is like a fog; it gets on your chest."

Then all took chairs and Tom cried vociferously: "An' to-morra you're to see him an' take action to give the beggar his doo. Hooray, Susie!"

"I'll see Mr. Sherren," she replied, a dim smile lighting her features; "but I don't know about taking action. I think perhaps it would be better to wait until Jack comes home."

"Thot's a sensible plan," said Tony as he reached for the bread. "Specially as things have tumbled oot. Ye see," he went on as the others awaited his explanation: "ah've seen Mrs. Saundisson since I were here last—an' ah've seen Micky Doolan. There's been trouble dahn river wi t'*Bluebell*."

Mrs. Surridge broke in with a dolorous inflection. "Ah! I always said that he'd come to a bad end; what else can you expect from a man with a passel of wives?"

"One's mostly enough, Missis," Tony asserted with a laugh, "Meanin,' as ah said before, no offence to anyone here present."

Having extricated himself thus from the possibility of any subtle meaning, he proceeded at his leisure: "As ah was sayin', Mrs. Saundisson number one has telled me so'thin'. T'*Bluebell* is dahn the cellar—run into by a sluckit steamer an' sunk."

Mrs. Surridge turned a quick glance on the blacksmith. "An' Saundisson?" she questioned.

"Nay, Saundisson is safe. Never fear. He's not t'be lost in a colleesion—not he. He's in hospital, or t'Sailor's Home, or some ither place where he'll be mendet free of charge."

Mrs. Surridge groaned.

Tony went on with the air of a prophet: "Noo, Mrs. Saundisson has got a bit money savit; an' her husband will be sackit by yon Scorcher chap—thot's a moral. Weel, Saundisson bein' seek, an' oot at elbows wi the Guv'nor, it's safe to say he'll allow his wife t'keep him—an' we'll see sights. How? Weel, ye knaw as weel as ah do masen, thot Win'bag's pullin' the strings in t'Cementies strike doon Riverton way—an' thot it's a fact t'Masters ken as weel. Therefore Saundisson will no find it a light an' easy job t'get another berth, an' therefore

he'll join the fight—thot's a moral. Ah don't say anythin' against t'strike, or for it; but ah knaw Win'bag wull be in the thick of it, when he's clear o' t'hospital."

"An' his hands bein' full," Mrs. Surridge beamed, "he won't have no time to think about Susie—or——"

"Nay, Missis, dinnot mistake me. Ah never said thot. Saundisson is a man thot can juggle with two balls at once. Ye must be kereful. Don't let her run ony reesks. A man wi a broken arm ain't dead. Meanwhile, Susie, you write t'Jack. Tell him ah've seen Dolly Crassley, a gell thot knows so'thin' or ah'm dreamin'. Say he's t'coom hame as quick as God Almichty will allow, an'—ye con say this too—Tony's gotten a bar, maybe two bars forged thot'll fit graund rahnd t'neck o' Dunscombe's murderer. Tell him that, Susie, wi gude luck fra Tony Crow."

Mrs. Surridge leaned forward, her eyes wide with interest. "What do you mean?" she questioned.

The blacksmith put his hand in his pocket and produced a small oval box with a crown in beaten brass on the cover. His face was puckered with the strain of reticence. "Ah," mean he replied, "thot Mrs. Saundisson picket oop yon box an' haunded it t'me. 'It's a box ah loove weel,' says I. 'Ah saw ye searchin' fer so'thin' the day ah met ye by t'deetch,' says she, 'is thot it?' 'It is,' ah said, 'an' thankee. I wouldn't lose it fer dumps.'" Tony replaced the treasure and looked at his friends. "Mrs. Surritch," he said, "ah'd been fossikin' fer thot box here an' away, fer months. Ah'd been fossikin' till ah was seek wi shame at ma blindness—an' then—eigh! fer t'curus way o' Proveedence—Mrs. Saundisson found it.

"Why curus?" he resumed with a note of pride; "because thot box was in t'pocket o' t'man wha killet Dunscombe—nowt less."

A long sigh escaped Mrs. Surridge as she, with the others, leaned forward quick with expectancy: "Tell us! Tell us!" they cried. "It wasn't Elliott—it couldn't have been—it couldn't——"

Tony Crow rose slowly from his seat. "Nay," he replied, "it was na Elliott; but ah doot the weesdom o' clack sae ah'll get me hame."

But to Susie, as he stood with her a moment preparing for his walk, Tony whispered a sentence that sent the blood leaping in the girl's cheek. "Ah thowt it recht t'tell ye, Lass," he added as a final shaft, "seein' ye're like ta be in some doot as t'the facks."

And this time the girl's cheeks paled.

CHAPTER III

The Strike

DECEMBER, bleak, rigorous, chilling the world with an early touch of frost. Gales from the northeast; gales from the west; black unholy gales from the southeast; then the inevitable fog cloaking the land while nature garnered her forces anew. Sometimes the days were full of steam and sullen earth-sweat: then came a burst of wind to sweep the poison germs to sea. Sometimes an interval of crisp, dry weather, and mankind sniffing the freshness, dreamed of skating; then more fog and mire and foul atmosphere, with the tall factory chimneys belching grime and smoke into the heavy air, and no breath of wind astir to lift it off the town.

The river running beneath leaden skies, took the tint and appeared as a swirling torrent of mud driven shamedly from the streets of the great city beyond. Sometimes the banks and seawalls were hard and crisp and rimed with frost; sometimes soft as a quagmire and nearly impassable.

Riverton in December has many characteristics, but these being the chief suffice. No man having lived a winter in the town would venture to dispute them; but, during the winter here portrayed, additional features were hideously prominent.

Gangs of gaunt and hungry workers thronged the streets; knots of haggard and unkempt women congregated in groups about the stagnant thoroughfares. Crowds of sullen, embittered men and women, workers and loafers, short and tall starving and well fed, crowded the common; and standing shiver-

ing under the bare trees, hung on the words which fell from the lips of impassioned orators, as though they expected to see the millennium accomplished in answer to their fervid spoutings.

Away in grim back streets; before factory, workshop, and foundry gates; before the entrance to numberless wharves, building yards, gridirons, docks; before big yards and little yards; before iron-studded gates and ricketty trellis; before the office of the man who rode to town in his brougham, and the office of the man who footed it thither with anxious eyes, stood little groups of men with books and sometimes bludgeons, waiting to persuade the would-be workers, and those blacklegs who had continued their toil during these troubles, to desist.

These were on picket duty.

Farther afield, uptown, the wives and daughters of manufacturers, tradespeople, and other small gentry who had nothing to do with the business on hand, were mustered under the banner of some wily Samaritan, to eke out the fight with presents of soup, clothing, and food; forgetting altogether in the flush of action and pity, that their president was using them and the strikers, as a lever by which he might presently climb to that paltry city office, of which he was enamoured. Forgetting also, that when men or dogs fall out it is wise to hustle them into a back yard, devoid of brick-bats, and let them fight it out in comfortable seclusion.

Now all these things had come to pass, because the masters had fallen under the ban of the trades unions, and a strike was in full swing.

Prominent among those who had banded together for the better working of this effective mode of suicide, was a league of waterside labourers; the boatmen, lightermen, barge skippers, and all the fraternity. They were named the "Rivermen's Union," and their watchword was "Regeneration of the

Masses." How this was to be accomplished, none of the speakers were agreed. Every man had his own theory, and the personal equation was a very strong factor in the genesis of his belief.

Saunderson was one of the leaders. As Tony Crow had predicted, the minute incident which had the honour of being the primary cause of all the trouble, was his discharge after the *Bluebell* catastrophe. The Scorcher had made no question of the matter; union or no union, strike or no strike, Saunderson was ordered to go.

That this was only a peg whereon to hang the gage of war, most men admitted; including some of the more thoughtful strikers. But Saunderson held other views. To him it meant simply an individual triumph over the Scorcher; the triumph of the worker as placed in opposition to the master; the triumph of labour as set in antagonism with capital. Saunderson's name was on everyone's lips; his personality carried all before him; his energy, his vigour, his decision were the stepping stones by which he mounted. He was eloquent in his rough and untutored fashion, and quickly caught the ear of those who had come out in sympathy only.

The man was as indefatigable in his pursuit of the masters as he had been indefatigable in his pursuit of Susie. He was as unscrupulous in his methods of attempting to bring the masters to his feet as he had been unscrupulous in his endeavours to gain Susie's love and companionship. For the nonce his earlier occupation was suspended. Just now he was bent on revenge, pure and simple; with visions of the fame he would acquire when his toils were accomplished.

The Scorcher had behaved to him as no man should behave to a brother man. His wife, the woman of lachrymose aspect and tiresome methods of attempting to regain his affections,

was an effectual shield against the want and misery suffered by his sympathisers. For Mrs. Saunderson had discovered her husband in hospital and had been so assiduous in her care, then and afterward, that for a while he surrendered his manly strength and beauty to her keeping—not, indeed, that he suffered remorse, but on the more sordid ground, that she had money and could aid him.

As she had said to Tony Crow, "Money works wonders." It had. But one cannot live permanently on the principle and not suffer for the indiscretion; yet this is what the patient woman, who had told the blacksmith of her troubles, was doing; and she was doing it simply because Saunderson was her husband; the man she had loved in her girlhood; and because the bitterness of her anger was all eclipsed by his helpless plight, and she was able to win his smiles now that she could aid him.

Thus had Saunderson lived for six weeks since the strike commenced, and had suffered nothing of the starving anguish which had been the lot of his followers. These things come but rarely to the leader. Saunderson was a leader. Only one was higher than he in organising and carrying out the details of processions, picketting, and stump oratory—and he was the secretary of one of the London labour guilds, and in receipt of a snug income.

The wolf may attack the stragglers in a flock of sheep; the enemy may bayonet the worn-out rank and file; but the shepherd and the general must escape unscathed; else, how on the face of God's earth is the work of leading to be done?

It is one of the laws of civilisation, and even those theoristic humanitarians who aim at regenerating the masses by providing pap and the piano for every British infant; who would pantaloon the naked savage and smother vice and drinking by

Act of Parliament, are not averse to wobble their comfortable carcasses under its gracious and inspiriting protection.

These things all happened in the year of our Lord, 19—, but on the 20th of December, when the worn year was staggering like an old man, heavy with the weight of days; when the world had approached within sound of carols and laughter of Christmas, sterner events were in train.

Disaffection was beginning to appear. Strike pay had become marvellously scarce. The gaunt-eyed men, with their pinched in waists and their jaunty, devil-may-care stride, were beginning to melt away from the general's care and showed a tendency to go over to the master's citadel.

The grim misery of a sodden earth; the cries of the starving children; the patient look of suffering in the women's eyes, and their own aching, vacuous misery, which no bowls of soup, nor promiscuous, charity-found loaf could assuage, were driving them thither.

What was to be done? Obviously something strong; something efficacious; something that should strike terror into the hearts of those grinders of human souls—the masters.

A meeting of the well-fed leaders and their following was convened at Riverton. The former jaunted thither in hansoms, the others crawled there painfully on foot.

This panacea, that panacea; this proposal, the other proposal, were submitted duly and with excessive circumlocution to the followers, who sat or stood in silence, glaring hungrily at each other.

A deputation to the masters: would that avail? Sha! it would but indicate their extremity. An appeal to the other Unions for help? That would take time, and they were starving.

A procession, with a band and boxes to collect subscriptions?

Take it away! A flea-bite on so huge a carcass, who would feel it. Take it away!

Double the pickets? Give us a rest! Take it away! Take it away!

Obviously something must be done or the movement would collapse of sheer inanition. Who was there fit to lead this halting crew? Where was the man born to lead who would now step into the gap and put life into these dullards?

Saunderson was that man.

A hoarse murmur of excitement grew in the secluded river-side grounds when it was seen that Saunderson was on his legs. The faces looked up at him; pale, gaunt, with stubbly beards and heavily lined eyes; men who thought, men who shouted; men with visions, men, stolid, apathetic; a sea of white faces with wistful, roving eyes; with savage eyes searching the unresponsive sky for a sign; waiting mute to be told what they must do—how. A chill wind swept through the ragged ranks; the river babbled in ears dulled by the hum of machines. They stared before them and saw the tall, smokeless chimneys holding lean fingers to heaven; pointing a signal they could not read. They stared to the left where lay a dim vista of slum-land perched on the river wastes; houses huddled together, dark, full of smells, the kennels which sheltered them by night. A pestilential neighbourhood this, abounding in beer shops, pawn shops, gin-palaces, places of amusement for the sansculotte of our cities. They turned to the right and their eyes fell on other houses; houses surrounded by trees, sleek lawns, gravelled drives—the Masters' land, standing high out of the river fog; high, where the air could move and the sun could laugh. The faces looked up. Voices mingled in a shout. Saunderson, who knew them, whom they knew, was on his legs, standing bareheaded and bowing to the plaudits which wel-

comed him. They shouted their joy, and he lifted his hand.

"Fellow-workers!" he roared from his eminence on the cart-tail; his great bass voice lashing them with its earnest vigour. "Fellow-workers an' Sons of Toil! Let me have a say."

He threw away his hat and rolled back his cuffs as he faced his audience. They cheered, and the uproar grew boisterous when it was seen that the London Labour Secretary had resigned his place. Saunderson vociferated, waving his arms to mark his points: "You are all like sheep—without a shepherd," he asserted in the brazen tones of the demagogue; "you have played follow-me-leader till your leaders are stuck fast in the bog, and some of you are for caving in.

"Hold on a bit—I'll go alone.

"What d'ye say to me for a leader? What d'ye say if I show you how to win? to win on every point—to win all along the line? an' to beat those Gawd-forsaken fossils, the Aristocracy? They tread on you." (Groans.) "They starve you!" (Shouts and groans.) "They grind you and polish off your wives an' children in the mill of perdition!" (Loud shouts and yells of execration.) "Why should they revel in vice an' pleasure? Why should they tread us in the ground while they roll over it in the gilded coaches our labour has found them? Shall I tell you why? Shall I?"

The shouts rose: "Go on! Go on, Win'bag! Let's have it. No more foolin'." The noise abated and he resumed:

"Down river, on the Medway saltin's, in frost and snow, in rain or fine we dig their clay, we load their barges; an' in frost or snow, gale or shine we run it up to their wharves, bucket it, drive their cranes, fill the trollies. You know as well as I do what this means. Sometimes it means somethin' more. Sometimes a poor devil gets caught an' comes out wrong end first—

good! it's all one to the masters; it's all in the day's work; one chap less in the world to cry for a job—it's nothing to anyone.

"That's one bit; now comes another. The masters build houses on land they own; we've got to take them—the wages they pay us goes back as rent. They hold shares in the pubs and gin-shops, the co-operatives—the wages they pay us goes back in dividends. Ten years in their factories fills a man's lungs wiv dust; he caves in, dies: what comes to his wife an' children? Are they helped—are they? God knows they aren't. God knows they go on the rates—or starve. What odds? No odds—a bloomin' workin' man the less to talk.

Sometimes a chap gets up an' makes a row in Parliament about all this. He makes a thunderin' row, because, perhaps, some poor devil has been nipped between the buffers, or a crew's got drowned because of rotten sails, or a dozen has got blown to Kingdom Come by a patched up boiler—good! There's a row. The Guv'ment side listen. They see it looks like an adverse vote—they say, 'That's bad.' They say, 'That's a damned bad case; it's the worst we've heard of; what shall we do to remedy such a outrageous state of affairs?' Then up jumps another gent—Guv'ment side—he shakes his old head, wags his pot belly, an' says he: 'His Majesty's Guv'ment accept the position. They will do somethin' to ameliorate the lot of these poor workers.' And, in the papers you see how the remark was received with cheers—sheers, my sons, is what they mean—sheers. The gent turns round to his mates at this an' winks the other eye. He holds up his hand: 'His Majesty's Guv'ment propose,' says he, 'to establish a Royal Commission to look into the facks of this terrible case. The names of the gentlemen who'll serve shall be made known to the House wivout delay.'

"Then he sits down. So does the Commission. It stays sittin' like a hen on a china egg. Nothin' comes of it—only, mind this! only, the Commission has scotched the row. The chap that made the row is dead, or sent up to the House of Lords, or made into an archangel, an' ask I you: Why does all this happen? Why does it happen? Speak up who knows ——"

A shout of encouragement went up. Saunderson thrashed his chest with his clenched fists. "I'll tell you why," he roared. "My sons, I'll tell you why!

"It's because those chaps who do the speechifyin', who do the promisin', are all members of some firm or other lookin' to draw their dividends; an' if it don't pay to alter things, things don't get altered. Vested interests stand in the way. Political economy stands in the way. Says the big pots: 'If we alter things our dividends will wait. We can't stand that. give 'em a Commission.'

"Mates! I say we find them in soldiers, we find them in sailors, we find them in servants, we find them in the sluts that fill our streets—an' what do they give us in return?" He dropped his voice just low enough to give the effect. "My sons! they give us a Commission." (Tremendous shouting and Saunderson expanding his chest to the breeze.)

The noise abated and he resumed: "I say, what if I lead you to win off these? Will you listen to me? Answer like true men, as Gawd is your Maker." The cheers rose, they filled the sodden air, and those few constables who were on the ground were hustled backward by the mob.

Again Saunderson shouted, holding up his hand for silence: "Listen then: I understand your meaning. You take me to lead. Very well; if my plan don't meet wiv your approval after I've told you, shout me down. I'll take a back seat."

The crowd yelled with one voice: "Go on! Go on!"

"Hold on a bit! What has happened? I'll tell you. We've fought a good fight and we've been out—nigh on two months. Two months of starvin', two months of misery, two months of Hell's own weariness—an' now some of us have gone in! Some of us have started suckin' the blood of the others; some of us are worthy of the death of that cursed traitor Judas, an' some more of us want to follow suit.

"What are we comin' to, fellow workers? Are we a nation of Judases? Are we a nation of Blacklegs?" (Howls and groans of execration.) "Gawd forbid. I say, Gawd forbid, an' I know he will forbid." The cheers broke out; they rose high, bidding him proceed.

"Boys! If we stick together we've won our fight. I tell you now—here, that we have won our fight an' that we're at the back of a great and splendid victory! Are we goin' to give in then? Are we goin' to the masters wiv our tails between our legs, to curry to 'em and ask them to take us back? Why should we? I say there's every sign showin' that we could want—that we've won. The Board o' Trade are to step in an' force the masters to accept the arbitration for which we have fought—an' starved—an' died! It's as good as settled; but there must be no waverin', no blood-sucking. We must stick together; you must follow me!"

Again the cheers and cries broke long and loud across the desolate riverside common. At the end Saunderson was seen holding up his hands. "Wait!" he shouted. "Hold on a bit! Keep your breath, my sons! You'll want it all to-night. To-night, did I say?"

"Yaas! Yaas! To-night, Win'bag. To-night an' no more foolin'."

"To-night it shall be. To-night at eight o'clock we meet

for our constitooshional! To-night we'll march to the tune of the cries of the masters. To-night we'll carry torches—alight! flamin'! burnin'! To-night we'll give 'em all the scare they want, an' to-morrow the strike will be done."

A dull roar of applause greeted the man as he clambered from the cart tail and forced his way through the crowd. He waved his arms shouting as he went: "At eight o'clock! At eight o'clock! By the statue in the square."

And the crowd yelled their irresponsive reply: "To-night! To-night! Gawd help the mawsters!"

It all sounded so feasible; it all sounded so just, so equitable to these poor starving wretches. The banks were loaded with gold; in the masters' houses were fires, food, servants, comfort. The shops had victuals; they had worked—God! they had worked; why should they starve? Why, also, should their wives and little ones starve, suffer, die? They should not suffer; as there is a God, so also is there an end to all things.

It was a wolfishly hungry, a stern and determined crowd that met at eight o'clock that night, when the year was within earshot of the annual carols and messages of peace and good-will. A crowd that knew its wants, boasted in a leader, stood shoulder to shoulder, and had developed enthusiasm. A dangerous crowd to tamper with had the police been quadrupled. Citizen meeting citizen in the ominous and brooding gloom. expressed the dictum of all who had effects. "There's trouble brewing to-night. Why have they not sent for help? They have found a leader. Law and order has none, and patience is the watchword of the civic dignitaries. Patience! and the rats are swimming the stream."

The night was black and still. Heavy clouds obscured the stars. Respectability remained indoors warming its toes in

comfort before the blazing fires; nursing the theories of respectability—patience, arbitration, bowls of soup, charity—things appreciated by the indigent, fought for by loafers, demanded by the Hooligan, but scarcely the *ultima thule* of those who desire to hedge labour with a ring fence through which they may strike at all outsiders. It was warm in the houses. Fires were a luxury, nearly a necessity to those who snuggled by them. A bitter night, said Respectability, upon which to be abroad. Only a fool would be out on such a night.

Hark!

A drum—many drums, the blare and din of a tin-pot band, playing hideously the Funeral March. What was it? Respectability, shrugging its shoulders, nursing its theories, listened and answered:

"The men on strike taking their constitutional."

That was true. But this time with a leader, with a man to tell them what they must do, how they must do it, when. The midnight march of the unemployed had begun.

When the hunger-driven wolves espy sleek horses running before the sleigh in distant Russia, they take no heed of the fire-arms of those who ride behind. They dash onward with snapping jaws and yelps of famine to revel in the hot blood of their victims, and know no halt except to whet their appetites on the carcasses of those of their comrades who have fallen. So with the human wolf when lashed by hunger. The first small fracas serves but to whet the appetite for blood and plunder. Then the crowd goes mad and rushes forward heedless and drunk with passion.

As the band headed up the street, followed by the motley crew of strikers marching to the tune of the Funeral March, a braggart dare-devil, a fool of more exalted rank, stood in the entrance of an hotel; his inner man warm, his outer man non-

existent, jeering at the misery, and inartistic semblance of the squalid procession.

He and many others had grown accustomed to these silent protests. They had happened so often. Nothing had resulted; never would result. The thing was a picture of the unappeasable strivings of the sansculotte; a cartoon showing the idiocy, the flagrant apostacy of a Government who had given to Things an education and forgotten to fill their bellies. The braggart shouted his disdain, speaking with a gesture of contempt—and instantly almost before the senseless words had died on the night, a score of gaunt men had dashed from the ranks and rolled him in the mud.

But the business did not end there.

From the hotel came the click of knives and forks, the din of popping bottles, laughing voices—Respectability enjoying high-priced Christmas cheer, and murmuring the messages of peace and good will in luxurious content. A lean giant sprang forward. He beckoned with his hand, calling to the stragglers: "What ho, mates! Here's grub an' to spare! Lay yer sides to it! Cotton on to it! Get outside it!" And instantly, as if by magic, the procession halted; the hotel was filled; a fighting, struggling mob overflowed the doors.

Those who could not enter broke through the windows and seized the things that came their way. Some hustled the screaming barmaids and scared waiters into another room; others ransacked the till. Some rolled casks of beer and spirits into the street; others passed out the more accessible bottles; and all who could get within the enchanted circle, drank and raved as though indeed the millennium had come.

Barrels of costly wine and spirit were trundled into the street, and for those who had no pots, a copious stream ran down the gutter for men and boys to lap. Close at hand were

several shops: bakers, jewellers, grocers, and the like. The contagion of plunder ran through the ranks of desperate men, as the ripples run over the river's surface before a breeze.

They were hungry—take and eat. They were thirsty—take and drink. They lacked money—take the jewels. The feeble barriers were torn down. Men clambered into the higher places and threw the goods broadcast to those who could not come near. Gawd! take and eat. Gawd! take and remember your starvin' folks at home.

The wolves were at work on the sleek carcasses of the horses now; their blood thrilled, it burned in veins long accustomed to a turgid stream; gin, whisky, port, brandy, beer—all had helped to fire that thrill; all had helped to madden them. Their eyes were aflame; their hearts were aflame, and the flickering glare of the torches shone on a mob whose wisdom had set before the aching misery of their lives.

And these things had grown while the civic dignitaries bandied terms; while the appalling arbitrament of starvation aided men dallying with fate from behind the cover of their banking accounts.

The handful of police who attempted to stem the storm, had been driven early from the scene. Who was there left to interfere? The civic dignitaries, warming their toes before comfortable fires? Who was to lead? The dainty civic dignitaries? Someone should send for a magistrate. Someone should read the riot act. Someone should send to the Tommies, lying in barracks at the other end of the town. Chut! The last post had sounded; the Tommies had received no orders and the watchword of the civic dignitaries was Patience.

So the mob having gotten them a leader or two, and having tasted the fruits of unalloyed triumph, started again behind

the band which now played the Funeral March in turn with "See the Conquering Hero Comes."

A sullen tramp of many feet echoed through the night. A flare of torches and the voices of hundreds, singing snatches of wholly irrelevant songs. Frightened women peered from behind drawn blinds; through the chinks of half-opened shutters. Groups of hurrying townsfolk raced homeward, and the hoarse shout of the leaders, who had caught at the military words of command, rang on the still air.

"By your left, turn!"

A thousand or more passed to the left at the junction of four main streets, and proceeded at quick time to the top of the road. They followed the band. The rest, marching under the blood-red banner of the Mercantile Marine, bore also to the left in obedience to the quaint command: "Hard a-starboard! Full speed ahead!"

These were the Regenerators of the Masses, and they swung along jauntily in the blaze of torch light to the tune of an old sea-song. They chanted in a minor key:

> "The times are hard and the wages low;
> Leave her Johnny, leave her;
> The fo'c'sle's a hell where the slime does grow—
> It's time for us to leave her!"

Saunderson led here. His destination was the wide, modern road of Riverton, where so many of the masters lived. The Scorcher had taken up his abode in Dunscombe's nondescript mansion. The Scorcher was a man who had lived, hitherto, solely under the permit of the Regenerators. Now they had determined to make an end of him, of his house, and of his ways.

A swarthy crew was by this time busy wrecking the wharf and offices which once had owned Dunscombe as their lord.

These others marching to the tune of "Leave her, Johnny, leave her," had the more delicate duty allotted to them, of "breaking the masters in the strongholds of their vice."

A hansom came clattering down the road carrying a man and his wife in evening attire. They met the band. The horse reared. A group of sweating warriors turned aside. They caught the animal, unharnassed him, threw the driver from his perch, and bundled the pair into an adjacent garden.

"Gawd! You'd go to pawties—an' theatres—an' there's men an' women stawvin'! Chuck 'im aat—over the bushes wiv 'im! Easy on the lidy! Pawss 'er aat gently—no lawks! We're aat to fight men!"

A jehu who drove "nobs" in evening dress, was of necessity a blackleg. "Dahn wi 'im. Chuck 'im aat!" Presently he lay stunned under the wall; the cab was dismantled; the horse flying through the night into the country beyond.

Again the words of command.

"Steady hellum! Full speed ahead!" and the flushed crew were on their way once more. Torches flared. The band brayed hideously. Drums rattled; and behind came the jaunty waterside labourers shouting their dreary shanty. The Scorcher's house came in sight. A yell of triumph went up to heaven. The word was shouted. "Down wi' the gates! Razzee the lot! Watermen to the front! Cementies forward!"

On one side of the road lay Dunscombe's old home, a other, shining from the windows of the lighthouse; on the gleam behind a lane of weeping willows, stood several large houses, tenanted by masters.

The mob divided with swift precision. They broke through the flimsy railings, uttering loud and persistent yells of triumph. A gang of burly river-men streamed into the symmetrical garden

passed the shivering Venus, and thundered on the door to break it in.

Upstairs lights flashed. The shrieks of maids and children sounded shrill above the din.

"Break it down! Ram it! Fetch that plank, someone. Flames! how firm it stands! Easy on the women! Get a hold of the Scorcher—nothin' else!"

The door stood sufficiently long to enable the Scorcher to escape. He fled incontinently, carrying his women folk through a gate at the foot of the garden. Then it fell, and the greedy mob entered sweating to find their vengeance balked.

A roar of baffled rage sounded in the house; but few were in the mood for shouts alone. The men dispersed rapidly; some to the bedrooms, some to the basement and study, where lay the safe. But this was locked and none had the wit or time to open it. Shouts rang high through the house:

"Wreck the furniture! Light a bonfire in the dining room—empty that oil about!" Then, one more enterprising than the rest stole through the upper rooms turning on the gas, and presently the house stood vacant of all but flames.

A dense mass of stone-throwing men surged in the roadway, bent on the less obtrusive amusement of wrecking glass. They were shouting, singing, mad with class-rage as they viewed the comfort of the masters in close comparison with their own undoubted misery. They wanted now no leaders. They had taken grip firmly on the bit of opportunity. Their appetites were whet; the smell of food stung them to further violence.

Who could stay their idiocy. Not Saunderson, skulking unabashed in the background. Not he of the London labour guild and the snug salary. The train was laid; the match applied; leaders were no longer a necessity in the forefront.

Dull clouds of smoke issued from the house that once was

Dunscombe's. The fairy castle he had so laboriously erected, that he had screwed and sweated and cheated to obtain, stood now clad in a new garb. Flames issued from door and window; fiery tongues of flame leaped across the garden. Higher, fiercer, redder they grew. The roar of human voices died momentarily as all turned to gaze upon the conflagration. The men, busy wrecking with brickbats the symmetry of other houses, paused to look. And in the silence that fell, a new sound broke upon the pregnant air.

The blare of bugle calls in the barracks; and close at hand the rhythmic beat of galloping horses.

The civic dignitaries had acted at last. The cavalry were out. Who led now? Not Saunderson. Not he of the London guild. They had heard while the roar of the fight and the fire had seemed to baffle all hearing—and they had taken steps accordingly.

A swift shout, a shout of fear, loud, intense, went up through the night: "Ware Swaddies!" And the dense mass began to melt like smoke before a breeze. Down street; up street; across walls, through gardens—anywhere, everywhere, out of the way of that charging, jingling troop.

But two or three thousand men cannot stampede with safety, or effectually in a moment. Those who had made most noise, who were on the outskirts of the mob, who had been busy hurling stones—they were able to escape; but the mass stood in savage dread, waiting to meet that from which they could not fly.

The jingle of accoutrements, and the gallop of the horses, grew insistently. A shuddering groan ran down the street. The human block hung poised, impotent with the weight of its own indetermination. The charging horsemen were upon them.

Sabres flashed, scabbards clanked, and the burnished steel shone in the light of the blazing house.

A wild shout, half of fear, half of bravado, sounded from those wretches, who, unable themselves to escape, sought to stem the racing tide with a volley of brickbats. And then the clang and clash of battle, the dull thud of sabres used flat, an indiscriminate turmoil; and at its height, the rumbling boom of an explosion, while all men held their hands to see the wreck of Dunscombe's house.

The flames died suddenly amidst the roar. When next they leaped aloft, a skeleton mansion stood roofless and windowless, with tottering walls amidst the blaze.

CHAPTER IV

Finem Respice

A SULLEN December morning broke at length across the battered town. Knots of men and women stood talking with bated breath in squalid streets. Strong patrols of police drafted hurriedly during the night from neighbouring towns, tramped the pavement. In barracks the disgusted Tommies lay under arms. The town hall cells were full to overflowing; so also were the hospital wards, where a score or more of the wounded were couched, thanking their gods for the change. But among them all was no leader.

The damage to property along the river front was terrible. Several yards had been fired, the wharves were wrecked, offices ransacked, blacklegs mauled, and barges sunk. In one street all the shops were windowless. Property had melted into thin air; everything had fallen in the fiery crucible of class-war.

Elsewhere in the town business houses remained closed. Respectability nursed terror within doors and watched, curiously, the magistrates going under protection, to the town hall. But there was scant necessity for anxiety now. Last night the men had been beaten heavily and decisively. The morning saw a wavering crowd, a crowd trusting no one, dreading each sound; a crowd without leaders—vanquished.

A hurried meeting was called early in the afternoon. Saunderson spoke again, urging them vehemently to stand firm. The day's sentences, so he assured them, had been light. It

was a proof of the awe in which they were held by the masters. Masters and Magistrates were all one. They dreaded the power of the unions. They dreaded interference by the Board of Trade. Most of the prisoners had been dismissed with a paltry fine, a fine the unions had paid as they would pay the rest, and to-morrow the others would come out in a similar manner. He begged them to stand firm. But the men shook their heads; they argued:

"No use, Win'bag; the chaps are goin' in."

Saunderson grew impatient: "Who says so, lies!" he cried.

"Naa—Gawd's trewth. Hear their naimes: Margots, Tom Boosy, Sutcliffe, an' others."

"Sutcliffe?"

"Ya-as."

"Gawd look askant on the blacklegs. He's another of ours."

The meeting broke up without any arrangement having been come to. In silence, in apathy, it melted away, like ice before a fire, and Saunderson went moodily to his home. The end was in sight. He sat down to brood.

What had been the use of it all? He asked himself whether he had benefited by the course of recent events, whether he was any nearer the goal of his ambitions, whether he had obtained an adequate revenge on the Scorcher? Again, he asked himself whether Susie would hear his name, see the reports of his speeches, and recognise his daring with a thrill of pride? Would she? Chks! he was beaten. Beaten. Susie would never hear, or, if she did—Gawd! what a crew of shufflers to lead. What a jelly-like, quivering brand of humanity. He could make men as fine out of a little cement and water. Dummies, dummies every one—as pulseless and invertebrate as a worm.

John Burns, Ben Tillett, Tom Mann—a score of men he

knew had climbed to fame over the bent backs of the starving strikers; so he argued bending over the fire. Why could not he do the same? They had been successful; why then was it impossible for him to win success?

He sat in the light of a dying day, glaring hungrily into the past; searching amidst the tangled skein of a life more than half spent, for the cause of his failure—for the reason of that unsuccess which had recently so horribly dogged him. In the North he had moved forward without pause. He had been immune from the disasters so common to men of his calling. He had made money and the fair sex had looked upon him with smiling eyes; he had known love.

His success continued when again he came to the Thames. He was skipper, and, for a time, was lucky in his ventures. He still made money: now his money was gone; he was without employment; he had lost Susie. Never before had he loved; now he loved but could not gain his love. His friends, the agitators, men of standing, men of position and assured income, men who had egged him on, stood aside. They flouted him openly and attributed the disasters through which they moved to his foolhardy bravado, to his unconsidered action. His! The knowledge shook him. The failure was his—it was appalling. He could not fathom it—dogged, shadowed—devilish! It was—what was it? Luck? Fate? What was it?

The questions leaped again in his brain and he set himself to search the incidents minutely from the beginning. The night in the Gat rose before him. The voice, the sheeny and transient moonlight, flickering, dazzling. Chks! He had no need for search. He told himself, leaning forward and watching the shadows, that he knew precisely what was wrong. There, at his right hand stood the cause of all his futile struggles.

Always it was present. Forever it jogged the wires, sounded alarms, whispered in his ears—intangible, inexplicable—the Curse of the Gat.

He rose unsteadily from his seat and glancing about the still room searched amidst the cups for rum—for his courage. Then, as he poured the spirit into a glass, a chill blast swept in from the street and he knew the door was opening. He turned to look. His wife entered. She moved over and sat on the horsehair sofa. Saunderson watched her, and tossing off the rum, growled: "Lumme! why can't you speak? Why are you crawlin' round like a sick snake? You give a man the fair hump."

Mrs. Saunderson sighed; she replied in a broken voice: "I did not mean to startle you. I wish I could help you more than I do."

He stared at her through bloodshot eyes. An idea took him and he cried out: "You can. Sit down there. No—no lights. I want to speak. On your answer depends my future —D'you take on?"

"Oh Jim! Come away from this place—come away. Never mind anything, only come away and let us start life afresh."

"Wiv you?" he questioned brutally. "Stow it."

She seemed not to hear, and continued: "There is a dense fog again—black and grim as the misery that is on the people. The strike has broken down. Men are going back to work and others are being found to take the places of those who won't return."

Saunderson snorted angrily: "The cursed blacklegs!"

She took no heed but extended her arms with an appealing gesture. "Come with me, Jim. Now when everything else has failed, I ask you to come back with me to Cornwall. There's father's little farm. We can work it. Dear! look

kindly, forget your troubles, and I will forget all that has been."

Saunderson sat gloomily silent, gazing at the small fire whereon a kettle sang, the only cheerful note in all that sombre room. His wife crossed over and kneeled beside him.

"Jim," she whispered, "what are you thinking of? Is it the old house, where I was a girl, and you came to show me what love is? Do you remember the lovely grassy slopes—the woods where we so often rested; the woods, where you took me in your arms and called me your pretty Lily—your gentle, white Lily? Do you remember how angry father was when he found I had been there with you, and how we laughed at him and you said you loved me and wanted to be married to-morrow. Do you remember it all? Dear, come back to it! Come back with me and let us forget all the misery we have gone through."

Saunderson scarcely heard. In thought he had been strolling down the sea-wall at Abbeyville, where, one night, two months ago, he had met Susie and caught her to him as she promised to be his. His blood flamed at the recollection. A sentence fell on his ears—could he go back to Cornwall—to the little farm, and rest with his wife? Could he? Could he return to this while the possibility of gaining Susie still lay before him? Scarcely. Yet, it should be as he had said. He would tell her his trouble—his fear, and let her decide. Then if she too admitted the power of the curse, he recognised that it would be useless to continue fighting; he would go away and have done with it. He turned quickly and found his wife's arm about him. He shook her off, speaking roughly: "On you depends what follows. Sit down. I can't talk free wiv you clawin' round my neck: Sit down."

She sprang from her knees and settled in another chair. She was stung to the quick by his brutal repulsion. "Go on!"

she cried with a queer, hard laugh. "Don't spare me. My feelings need not concern you."

Saunderson, engrossed with his own inexplicable doubts, continued without perceiving what a shock his words had caused. He said: "When I came round into the Thames eight months ago, a queer thing happened to me. We got becalmed in the Deeps—nigh to Fisherman's Gat, an' had to down mud-hook or drive ashore. So we anchored."

He spoke with the air of a baffled man, searching amidst a life crammed with incidents for the particular key he required; he fell again into the river argot, his rich bass voice filling the room: "It's not a nice place to be kickin' about in. The tide runs bad. There's sands almost all round you, an'—Micky Doolan, he's been tellin' me of the—curse— an' run of luck that followed the *Flying Cloud* after she came under it. But, there's no wind, an' we're not a steamboat, so we've got to lie an' chance it. We lay—an' chanced it.

"Then comes a thunder squall, rippin' an' tearin' everything that's loose from its hold—an' the *Bluebell* breaks her sheer—an' drifts—slow as flames, she drifts—across to the Gat. Did she touch? Aye, she did touch: for how long? For three mortal hours. Chks! is there any luck to come out of a deal like that?"

Saunderson leaned forward with his face in his hands. The subject fascinated him. He saw the scenes of which he spoke; marked their inevitable movement; the gradual absorption of self in greater issues unrolling somewhere—somewhere—far away, remote, out of the ken of men lacking knowledge. He rubbed his brow and continued:

"Afterward, we floated. Then, while I'm sittin' on the companion, the stroke of eight bells comes across the Deeps from a steamer goin' north. I turned to look. There's a

queer kind of sheen hangin' across the path of the Gat—close to loo'ard of wheer we're anchored. I don't mind comin' across that sheen anywheer bar the Gat. I don't mind it—an' Micky Doolan, he don't mind it either. Ya-as—it was curious—curious. I got up—an' stood watchin'. The steamer dies away in the haze—an'—" He paused, to examine the shadows near the fender, then taking up his glass he tossed off the remaining spirit and resumed:

"An' while I'm lookin'—somethin' happened. What was it? Some one singing out—a queer cry: what could it be? A chap fallen from yonder silent death? It's all likely—yaas, it's all likely.

"What did I do? What would any man do? I took the boat an' scullied seaward. I pulled a mile—maybe two. There's a dark patch further out. I sculled some more—an' came down to it. There's nothin' there bar a water sodden hatch, covered with grass an' slime—green—loaded wiv barnacles. Been there for ages. An' out seaward there's the glint of the Gat, an' the—the——"

Again Saunderson sank into silence, and sitting with his chin resting in his hands, gazed steadfastly into the glowing embers. He seemed to have entirely forgotten the presence of his wife, sitting also silent, and watching him with a new-born anger gleaming in her eyes. His voice rose in a growling monotone, as though in answer to some spoken question: "What did I do? What would anyone do? I came back aboard—an' there's Micky Doolan waitin' fer me. 'It's the Curse, Skipper; he says, 'the Curse of the Gat, an' you're come under it.' That's what he says; but," he shouted savagely, waving his clenched fist; "that mate ain't judge an' jury; he's not omnipotent, as you might say, although—yaas—I know—I know——"

He stopped speaking, and drawing his chair nearer the fire, sat moodily staring into the flames. His wife watched him unmoved. He resumed after a lengthy silence, in muttering, broken sentences.

"The voyage ended bad; I know it. Goin' up Sea Reach, we get run down by a drunken collier, an' one of the chaps is drowned. Bill Jeffries it was—a good chap. A chap wiv a wife an' four chidren—all left to stawve by Dunscombe. Fair, ain't it? As though Bill Jeffries had anything to do wiv it. Yaas, it's—fair—fair as flames.

"Then comes the *Stormy Petrel* do: A derelict in the Gat, you mind, an' Elliott's bent on gettin' hold of her. We got hold of her—yaas, oh yaas, we got hold of her; but there's a row first. Then Dunscombe's killed—an'—an' you're come back. Eh? Shhh! Who in flames is that?"

He rose from his seat and with the unsteady gait of one on the verge of sleep, crept noiselessly to the door and flung it wide.

The fog steamed silently in, filling the room with moisture. He stood peering into the murk and growling savagely: "Who's there? Who's there?"

His wife's voice fell on his ears speaking in hard, ringing tones; with disdain. "Shut the door, Jim. Really you haven't the nerve of a cat."

Saunderson turned and looked at her. "Lumme!" he growled; "I'd almost forgot you're there."

"So it seems."

He moved over threateningly. "What d'you mean?" he cried.

"You were asking me to decide a question for you," she evaded; "a rather momentous question."

Saunderson regarded her passive attitude with annoyance.

He crossed the room, found the bottle of rum, and, leaning against the door, took a lengthy pull. "Yes," he said, "I did. It's this. You're better educated than me—you maybe know. It's this. Can a curse spoke scores of years ago—work harm on them—as has had the misfortune—aye! for that's what it was, as Gawd made me—to cross the path of it? Answer me that an' I'm done."

"I don't believe in such things."

He leaped upright, calling out in fierce agitation: "Eh! Lumme, that's the best word you've given me yet. You don't believe it possible?"

"No."

"Nor other folk?"

"Only ignorant people."

"Then you can't damn a man—body an' soul—for years on end?"

She replied with a shudder he could not see in the dim-lit room: "Men are more frequently damned by their past lives. By the trouble they bring on themselves, by their own wicked actions."

"What in flames d'ye mean?"

He stood up scowling with rage. His wife rose to confront him. She spoke without a tremor: "Don't be foolish, Jim. Learn to control yourself or drink less. The spirit is too much for your head."

She answered so coolly, with such a hard, metallic ring in her voice, that Saunderson could only stare in amazement.

Was this the terror-struck wife he had spurned? Was this the lachrymose woman he had bullied and who had never dared to retaliate? Scarcely. Chks! what was in the wind now? He waited in silence for further speech. She watched him with anger-laden eyes, yet her voice quivered. "I came here and

found you in trouble. I nursed you through your illness—for you were poor. I found you money. I slaved for you. I bore silently every reproach, thinking you might grow kinder—that your love would come back. I bore your brutal passions, your violence; I bore all—hoping you would see I had no malice, no thought of the past; and now—I ask you to come away from this misery, and you turn on me like a tiger—like the wild beast that you are—like a savage."

Her voice fell into a sneering key: "My arms are claws, are they? Very well: find softer. I am lean and scraggy, am I? Very well: find plumpness. I shall trouble you no more with my caresses. I am going—home."

She passed quietly to the door, opened it, and let herself out; but Saunderson took no heed. Already he was immersed in thought, steeped to the ears in a new picture that had unfolded before him. His courage had returned. Like a spring long sealed and dammed by frost it broke forth at the first touch of sun and overwhelmed him. Fear of the unseen no longer throbbed at his vitals.. For the moment it was gone, and he was sane—sane and free from dread. She knew. Aye! she knew! He grew bold as he recollected her sneering laugh. Curses! Ghosts! they were not—never had been. He swore it, facing the fire: glaring hungrily at the image he saw there—of Susie; Susie with the golden hair and gentle speech. God! if it could have been—if it could have been! If he had known——

He sat a long while brooding and in silence over this thought. The room was very dim. The kettle had ceased to sing, the fire was dying slowly. The untrimmed lamp burned low with a gurgling noise in its throat. Very still, very sombre was the night.

A footstep thumped the pavement outside, and he glanced

up. It drew near, halted at the door, and a postman's knock echoed in the silence. He rose and opened.

"A letter and a telegram." said the man. "The wire wouldn't have come sooner by messenger."

Saunderson received the information and his correspondence without a sign. "Right," he said; "have a drink?"

"Can't stop, Cap'n. Big round just begun. Night's playing the dooce with the patrols."

Saunderson closed the door and sat down to examine his letter. It came from a friend—a barge owner in a small way—who offered him the command of his second vessel. The telegram was concise; it ran thus:

"Black George sails to-morrow day tide.
"SNUFFLES, MATE, LIMEHOUSE."

So—to-morrow, day-tide. Toward dusk, then, the *Reindeer* might be expected off Riverton. Saunderson's vision had fallen from that new thought. The telegram occupied him.

Sutcliffe had been appointed temporarily to the *Reindeer*. He was a blackleg—one of those who stood in the path of his leader's advancement; one of those of whom it had been decided to make an example. He was a man who happened also to be his leader's personal enemy, a man who had cheated him of his hardly earned gold; a man of whom he had spoken to his wife in terms of the plainest meaning. Chks! His wife—where was she? Would she return? Would she see? And if she did? What then?

Late that night Saunderson quitted finally the lonely cottage and betook himself to a meeting of those stalwart Regenerators of the Masses who still held rosy visions of winning the strike. It was the last time he met them; the last time he ever put foot to the floor of the home wherein his wife had nursed him back to strength.

CHAPTER V

Snuffles

A BOAT lay idly beside the Garter Pier and for two hours a man had appeared to doze in her stern sheets with his head wrapped in the folds of a heavy coat. But during all that period he had watched the swollen river running muddily seaward; watched the fading daylight, the swirling tide, the dwindling distance, the growing, snake-like causeway.

Far out into the dim river it meandered like a giant centipede, shining with the gleam of slime and ooze. It held between its crooked legs the trailing refuse of the towns, straw, sticks, rags, tin cans; making with them little whirlpools of eddying scum, stirring the muddy depths; ruffling the surface with moving beads of foam.

Beyond the causeway the tide swept downward, pulseless, inert, but very swift It roared past the mooring buoys and they twisted and rolled back upon tightened cables like giants in pain. It hissed past the hulks moored so thickly in mid stream, carrying seaward the garbarge from their decks, the groans of the cables, and the shouts of their crews. It heard the jumbled roar of cranes swinging coal, of winches clattering, of ice churned and pulverised in the shoots of the fish carriers—noises like groans, noises like sighs, with a note of despair, of hope, bouyant, boastful, inextricably tangled—tangled as are the lives of men.

Above the causeway there towered the high sea-wall; a thing of mud and clay, impossible as a promenade, picturesque and

very English, as a sticky means of communication with the down-river Forts. Beside it stood the Garter Pier Hotel, lonely, isolated, staring at the hospital, as the hospital again stared at the fort. Nothing else, only the marshes, the ditches, a far-off range of hills, and the steaming marshland breath. It curled white over the farther fields at sunset. Gates stood up in it. A mill appeared in the middle distance floating and without a base, its wings revolving with the inflexible purpose of all driven things. Reeds stood up in it, swaying heavy heads, wet, shining. Then the mist marched forth. It surged about the distant landmarks, mounted the sea-wall, and flowing stealthily north met a companion mist creeping from companion marshes, unseen down there where the centipede pier pointed a crooked finger over the river. And, as if the mist had been the signal for which he waited, the man in the boat uncovered his head and looked about without concern. He stood up. Saunderson's heavy frame loomed hugely in the haze. Very big and silent he appeared as he paused there shading his eyes and staring into the blur of masts, still shadowed against the smoke and fog of the upper Reach.

He moved from the boat and the frail craft shivered; the bubbles floated seaward in shoals. The pier held him; its straggly legs trembled under his march; the planks quivered. He passed up the steps where a board like a sign announced the fact of the causeway's extreme length, and the Garter Pier hotel opened its maw and swallowed him.

Later, he came out accompanied by two stalwarts: two of those who owed a grudge to the turn of events; who believed, with Saunderson, in the inevitable mastery of the Cause. And creeping over the slimy centipede, the trio came to the boat. The boat took them in; she marked the fact by sinking some further inches, by gripping the tide, by the absence of irres-

ponsible movement. Henceforth the man was her master and she slid forth, obedient, willing to be coaxed, cajoled, ordered by him sitting in the stern, by Saunderson, the man of destiny no longer troubled visibly by the shadows of a tortured mind.

He commanded now the boat of one of the river pickets. They moved out through the steaming mist, crept past shadowy hulks, and noted the roar of the tide under the bows of a bluff merchantman of the Ballarat days. They swept on, angling to pass the buoys, slow against the tide, swiftly with it; always enveloped in shadow, always silent, until they had obtained an offing, and could move at leisure.

Across the water lay a police launch, snugly moored under the stern of a hulk; but the trio no longer feared her espionage—she was asleep, hidden in the dusk and smother of night. Riverton, with its silent wharves and deserted factories, was asleep also in that smother. Official Riverton, which had done its duty, bragged now in the clubs and drawing rooms of its prowess. The back of the strike was broken. The beggar crowd was beaten. Starvation was the one medicine it understood—starvation, the panacea of Capital when dealing with Labour; backed perhaps with a touch of the spur if the crowd became intractable—starvation had won. But official Riverton, gloating over its triumphs, gloating over the verve of the new men imported to keep the machines humming, to keep the bank accounts on the upward trend, forgot what the police had also forgotten; that in times of dissension between masters and men, two forces often come into being—the opportunity of revenge; the chance of paying off private scores under the banner of the fight.

Ostensibly the picket's boat moved out to seek the *Reindeer* because she was one of the Scorcher's vessels and was manned

by blacklegs. In reality Saunderson's grudge against Sutcliffe was at the bottom of the whole business.

Had it not been for Saunderson, no pickets would have ventured out that night; but he found men whose hearts were dead and whose shoulders writhed under the blows of fate; he found them, nursed them, helped them out of the till of the Cause, and they accompanied him, believing in him, swearing by him. They could do no more.

The boat came round in answer to a touch of the rudder; then, paddling easily, they lay full in the track of downward vessels. The tide was at half ebb, the river crowded with barges floating lazily with boomed out sails and flapping jibs. Now and again a steamer came swiftly out of the haze and left them wallowing in her swell; then, as darkness grew, little gleaming eyes, red, green, white, sprang into being, marking the driving shipping. The wheezy fog-horns redoubled their cries; the weird shrieks of hidden sirens filled the night with jets of sound.

Still the boat with its silent occupants moved stealthily zigzag on the face of the waters. Several black-sailed Burmah-men, with Invicta painted on the luff of their mainsails, passed like wraiths in the darkness. These sail at all times; nothing short of collision or dismasting stops them; but the *Reindeer* was not there. A snorting collier lashing the foam with her half-merged screw, steered wildly into the void, waking the echoes with an unholy scream. Barges followed. In groups, singly, in pairs, lashed together, they passed onward, but none showed the signal which "Snuffles, Mate, Limehouse," had arranged.

The boat drove onward carrying her dogged crew. They listened to the clank of chains and heard the swish of the leather scoop and the shout of a skipper, under Coalhouse, digging for sand. They passed a buoy winking a dim challenge to dis-

aster on the point—a death trap of the river this—and swept onward, rowing sometimes to search a vessel, sometimes driving idly with oars alert to move; never answering a hail, nor taking a tow until the tide was spent and they were somewhere off Thames Haven.

A gloomy outlook on any dark night in all truth; but with the haze in their eyes, the raw air down their throats, and the profound and unspeakable solitude of the open river to point their misery, their lot was sufficiently desperate to atone for the clamour they raised when the World's End Tavern stood at hand. But Saunderson was obdurate. Nothing could shake the grim tenacity with which he fastened on a scheme when once it was planned. He moved from his seat, fumbled in the stern sheets and produced a bottle of rum. The men passed it from hand to hand, descanting on their chief's sagacity; then lay back to wait for the flood.

When this came, they started once more to sweep the Reach toward Riverton. They moved methodically, from point to point; they no longer "drove" with the tide, but steered accurately for those anchorages where downward barges might be found at rest.

They searched about the paraffin jetty, off West Blyth, under Hope Point, across the river, below the powder magazine, but the *Reindeer* remained unfound. The crew became weary. They growled together, arguing the possibilities: "Have we missed her?. . . Surelie she's got this far. . . Looks as though she haven't . . . Steady! there's a crawft over there—pull port oar! What's that on the skirt of the tide —under Coal'us?"

"Wot is it? It's three lights, an' the middle 'un's green."

"Chks! it's the *Reindeer*. Go easy—no bloomin' larks! Snuffles has done 'is bit."

They moved swiftly forward and in five minutes had brought to under the *Reindeer's* bow. Saunderson crawled aft. The mate met him in the shadow of the mainsail. "'Ad a doin'? he questioned. Saunderson brushed trivialities aside; he said:

"All right by your lights, I see."

"Yaas;—but old George ain't 'ere."

"Oh! how's that?"

"Done a bolt: 'ow could I odds it? Some bloomin' female come 'er 'anky-panky on 'im, an' 'ee cleared."

Saunderson stood very still; he eyed Snuffles up and down. "What sort of female?" he questioned.

"Tall, dawk eyes, fluffity 'air."

"Ah" Saunderson clutched at his neckerchief, fighting the leaping words—tall, dark, fluffity hair! Again he saw them; again that frowsy picture of a gaunt, unhappy woman swam before his eyes. He turned suddenly on the mate: "Get your lights in." Then, after a pause:—"Who's here?"

"Tom Boosy."

"Did—did she tackle him?"

"Ya-as; but Tom's wife's stawvin' an' 'ee says, t'Hell wi the pickets: blackleg or no blackleg, I'm goin',' an' 'ee come."

"Right! You keep handy—an' don't let the chaps on board. Tom Boosy'll do as well as another to—skear 'em. They're all blacklegs; we'll teach 'em——"

He went forward, climbed through the hatch, and passed into the hold. The mate stood on guard above the cabin scuttle.

The voices of the night sobbed eerily high up about the hounds of the mast. The river swirled and eddied moving Londonward. Drops of moisture fell pattering to the deck from the canvass fluttering in the breeze. Once or twice a

grinding squeal echoed in the stillness; then Saunderson emerged sweating from the hold. The mate crossed to meet him. "Wot abaht 'im dahn aft?" he questioned.

"What about him?" Saunderson echoed. "Get you into the boat."

Snuffles argued: "Why—you ain't fer leavin' 'im— are you?"

"Why not? He's a blackleg, ain't he? Let him get out as he likes. He's got his boat—what more do you expect me to do for him?"

"It's murder," said the mate, "or precious nigh to't—an' I ain't goin' to 'ave no 'and in that."

Saunderson swore. He urged under his breath: "He has his boat—he has his boat; she won't go in a minute. Get you into mine."

The mate objected still. He shook his head, saying: "I'm not on. I'll go an' ca' 'im."

Again a savage oath rang out as Saunderson saw confronting him the thwarting influence, the intentional hindrance that baffled him always. His anger took shape as the mate turned nonchalantly, insolently, to go aft, and he moved behind and struck him heavily under the ear. "Lie down, dawg!" he growled. "Do as you're bid."

Snuffles lay down and Saunderson hastened to the boat. He spoke with a snarl. "Cast off!" he cried. "She's got her belly full—out of it."

The stalwarts stood up to receive him: "Wheer's Snuffles?" they questioned.

"Stayin' to get the skipper into the boat."

"Right! We don't want to be seen—shove off."

They moved out into the darkness and the darkness covered them.

Like a blanket it shrouded their actions, hid their passage, and masked the stirring waters until Riverton stole out of the gloom to give them welcome.

But Saunderson had forgotten that Snuffles, too, had been one of those who manned the *Bluebell* that night in the Gat.

Part VI

The Red Gauntlet

CHAPTER I

A Woman Passes

NIGHT had fallen. A chill winter's night with the wind moaning fitfully through the tall spars and soot-black rigging of a cluster of barges lying within Limehouse basin. Long ago they had hauled down, sailed or towed down; now they waited for the dock gates to open—waited in readiness to spread their wings and pass out among the lights, the tugs, the steamers, thronging the crowded Reach which was their home.

Among them, lying gunwale to gunwale with several dumb barges* was the *Red Gauntlet*, a powerful Essexman commanded by the whilom leader of the Riverton strike. Their crews were still ashore, taking a final drink at a bar not far distant; but Saunderson had not joined them. He moved under a shadow The strike had failed—he had pinned his faith upon success. It was dead—dead at the hands of men who should have kept it alive. He had no desire for their company. The hope kindled, momentarily, by his wife's words, was dead also. He had lost trust in all judgment save his own, and his own he doubted. He argued that there were some things no

*Barges having no masts—propelled by oars.

one can understand. He hobbled amidst scenes requiring the assistance of a well-balanced brain, and full mental equipment. He hobbled as a man armed with a crutch hobbles in a race. He had lost. He recognised it, but, as a handicap, he recognised there must be a reason.

He sat in the companion smoking moodily, his mind bent on the efforts which had failed. He searched his actions but found no guile in anything he had done. He worked on a skein exceedingly difficult to disentangle; twisting, passing, dipping; all in the process of exculpation—self-exculpation. He saw nothing abhorrent in his course; nothing wanton. It was the outcome of life, of circumstance. He knew of no discipline but the discipline of brute force; knew of no influence, human or divine; had never learned the necessity for self-control and restraint. These things were not taught in the schools through which he graduated. The Act passes them by. The "payment by result" system, has no use for them. Teachers wishing to protest, conscientiously, against the inclusion of Doctrine, are allowed to protest. They receive absolution at the hands of a new Pope—a multifarious concern with many heads, much given to the wagging of tongues across the floor of a House where all alike are irresponsible. The scholars are held up like toast on a fork, to see if they are done; then passed over to the table of life with a smirk of satisfaction. The exponent of the Rights of Man shouts his grievance in the courts, in the park; and the papers, pandering for pennies and halfpennies, acclaim him Martyr—"God's in His Heaven, all's right with the world."

Saunderson saw many things as he sat there smoking and troubled by the grievous inequality of wealth; but he saw them through spectacles so blurred, so out of focus, that only a distorted picture was possible. A moral squint, a mental twist, was the result. He it was who suffered. He it was who was

misunderstood, maligned, laughed at. If he had learned how—if Susie had been near to aid him—if the *Bluebell* had never come under the curse, supposing always that a curse was a thing tangibly possible. Chks! the might-have-beens stretched out into the distance like a herd of jackals, all clamouring for food while he stood watching with an empty sack.

A voice rolled out of the silence as he sat there staring into the past, searching the future. He listened intently. The cry sounded again—a commonplace hail: "*Red Gauntlet* ahoy!"

He rose to shout, "Hello!" and the answer came back to him.

"Bring yer boat to the steps. There's some one awskin' fer you."

He considered the matter but a moment. He saw himself in the midst of an appalling trend of circumstances, yet had nothing to urge why he should not go ashore to answer the summons of a friend. The matter stood concisely in his brain. Any action he might take could not alter his future. The end was fixed, immutable, perhaps implacable—a matter arranged by powers of which he had no conception. For some reason they were antagonistic to his advancement; to his movement up that ladder he had set himself to climb. It was useless to argue; useless to contend; he was weary of the whole business—unutterably weary.

He stepped into the boat, sculled ashore, and ascending the steps stood looking for signs of a visitor. No one appeared. Far up the quay a man walked; farther still, puppets worked in the docks, puppets who shouted, hurrying like driven dogs, struggling in the light of glaring arc lamps to earn their mead of paltry shillings. They deserved their fate. He argued that they should have joined issue with him; then would they have been masters and not slaves. Near at hand was silence.

The clustered barges rubbed sides like sheep on a cold night. Across the way were lonely capstans, a flagstaff; the dock gatemen's cottages. The place seemed utterly vacant. Saunderson growled angrily. He turned to retrace his footsteps, then a soft voice, calling from a dark angle of the shed, whispered his name.

He recognised the tones instantly and twisted about with sudden passion. It was a woman's voice—the voice of his wife.

"You!" he cried approaching. "What d'you want wiv me now?"

She held up her hands whispering: "I have come to warn you. I have come to warn you."

"To warn me? How much more of your foolin' d'you expect me to stand?" he shouted the questions angrily, and again she lifted her hand.

"Hist! Speak quietly. Wait till that man is out of hearing."

He stood mute, listening to the failing steps. They died, and Mrs. Saunderson resumed: "There's been an 'accident' down river," she whispered; "and now the *Reindeer* has been lifted—they find she was scuttled. Who were the men that did this, Jim?"

He glanced about, marking the heavy solitude and his reply fell softly under his breath: "I suppose you don't want me to answer that. I suppose you know—else—what——"

"I do know. God help me, I know too, that—some of her crew were drowned—drowned."

He swayed unsteadily on the wet stones. A sentence escaped him. "Ah! they were bigger fools than I took them for." Then, after a tense pause: "An' you'll give information?"

She looked up with a laugh, imperious, incongruous: "Why should I? Besides, I could not give evidence. Even if I

could, why should I? No, I came here to warn you—nothing more."

Saunderson watched her with a dogged frown. He questioned her motives. He could not comprehend them; they were a sealed book—Sanscrit. "You ain't fond of me," he suggested. "Why don't you fix me off an' have done wiv it?"

"Because I loved you, Jim; because you were my lover in days long past; because I am your wife and cannot do it."

"You expect me to swallow that?" he growled, still watching with that set frown. "You think I'm fool enough to take that in? What's to prevent me chuckin' you an' all you know into the dock an' finishin' the business?" he threw out the suggestion in bluster and without thought.

She faced him scornfully. "Your own cowardice, Jim—nothing else."

"My cowardice!" he shouted, clutching her arm. "Chks! you don't know me. Who's to hear you; who's to know I've put you away down the cellar? It's dark. There's no one about. How am I to trust you now you know such a thunderin' sight of knowledge? Eh, answer me that?"

She struggled free and confronted him with passionate eyes: "You dare not do it because you are afraid of things unseen. You dare not do it because, when I am dead, I shall haunt you—you will never be free. Waking or sleeping your coward mind will tremble before the memory of the woman you cursed with your love, with your life, and your miserable unbelief—do you understand?"

He faced her in silence.

"On the river, when it is dark, I shall be at your side as you steer your vessel. In your sleep I shall be with you flitting unseen; in lonely roads and silent anchorages I shall be near you—driving you to the hell you are always talking of. Come

—exercise your strength. Put me down the cellar. You dare not. Pah! big man, you are a coward."

Saunderson shrank back. He was appalled by her vehemence. The sweat stood cold on his brow. He leaned against the shed-side without a word in self-defence, without a sentence in self-justification. Mrs. Saunderson saw her advantage and moved near, speaking very slowly.

"I came to see and to warn you, because I loved you—once, and because I thought you might wish to leave. But now I see that you will not do so, that you will continue as you began. Stay, the air is prophetic to-night—eh, Jim? You agree? Good: then I will prophesy. You see it is so much easier to act when one knows what is inevitable—inevitable, mind. You can't shirk fate. You can't get rid of the consequences of your wicked actions. They follow you. That is why men call them the inevitable. You know what that American says? No? Well, I'll tell you:

> " 'If wrong you do, if false you play
> In summer among the flowers,
> You must atone, you shall repay,
> In winter among the showers.' "

She broke off and for a moment appeared to meditate departure, then with a swift turn drew nearer, lifting one finger.

"Listen," she said, "you will win that girl you think you love so well—you will win her and you will die. But you will win her first. What matters what comes afterward or how soon? Death! What is death if you have had what you have sought so long—eh, Jim?"

Again she broke off with that abrupt laugh he found so appalling, and took a step again in his direction.

"But many things will happen before that—so take heart, big man. I shall not be here to annoy you with my love. I

shall not be here to hinder you. Why? Listen, I will tell you."

She leaned forward gazing into his downcast face.

"Jim," she whispered close in his ear, "I am going on a long journey to-night. I shall never see you again."

He started backward uncertain of her meaning.

"Do you remember how you left me last time?" she questioned in a new tone, the banter gone. "Do you? There was a child then. It died, Jim. I was glad it died, because I was alone and miserable. Now there would be a child again. But I do not wish to see it. I can never want to see children again. So I am going away—and you will be free to run your course alone. Will you say good-bye? Will you wish me luck on my journey? It isn't much to ask; but the road is difficult. Wish me luck, Jim, for the sake of what has been."

She faced him, holding out her hand; but the pleading intonation had done its work. He no longer feared. He drew away with an oath.

"Luck!" he shouted almost fiercely. "Why should I wish you luck? You've been my curse—You've been my curse. I wish to Gawd I'd never set eyes on you." He advanced toward her with a gesture so menacing that, holding high her hand, she retreated slowly toward the dock-sill.

"Push me!" she cried in bitter sarcasm. "We are alone, big man. It will save that girl you think you love, for then, Jim, you will have killed your wife and unborn child."

Again he sprang back and remained watching. "You've been my curse—my curse!" he reiterated.

"Passion is your curse," she mouthed. "Psh! I fancy you understand."

Saunderson stood in the shadow of a shed. He noticed the lamplight dancing in the pavement pools and saw that the

water rilled up the stones. In one place oil had fallen. Here the water bore no sign of movement, but it threw a slimy stain upon the concrete, like the track of snails, slugs, worms. He lifted his gaze and saw that he was alone.

Far up the path a figure moved.

He might have pursued this woman, beaten her, thrown her into the dock, or done any of the hundred and one things his superior strength permitted; but he did not do so. He returned to the barge instead. There was rum in the locker. His courage ebbed. It was of the sort that requires the aid of stimulants.

He slunk into the narrow cabin like a whipped cur and made for the liquor. Hah! A draught revived him. He lighted his pipe and took a seat on the companion stairs. The clock at the dock-head struck the hour—twelve sonorous strokes, and silence ensued. The dying fire cracked and fell in with a crash.

Saunderson rose from his seat and approached the stove. He kicked it, growling furtively of the noise, and the cinders leaped into a blaze. He examined the cabin; it was narrow, stifling. He was alone. Nothing moved. He decided that he required air—air and freedom to think. He crept to the stair-head and stood leaning over the half-drawn scuttle.

The night was black now, with a misty misery of thin, cold rain. The nearer electric lights loomed in sullen splotches, blinking like giant cats in the stagnant air. The wind sobbed eerily through the rigging towering so high into nothingness; everywhere were voices, everywhere shadows—shadows that moved, gesticulated, spoke. Reiterating the words he had heard, "You will win that girl you think you love—you will win her," he asked himself how that could be possible while his wife lived, and a further sentence leaped in the gray

water scintillating under the lamp—"You will die." Die? Of course he would die. He admitted it, gripping hands on the edge of the scuttle. All men die once. His end was doubly assured—doubly. He was certain of that. No other certitude appeared. He groaned aloud, praying that he had never met this woman—that she had died as had been said—that Susie had loved him—Susie who could have helped, who could have aided him in that climb he desired. "If," he argued it with clenched teeth, "if that woman had——" and stopped with a sudden thrill. "Hist! what's that?"

He leaped to his feet as a shriek rent the air. The noise of splashing water fell on his ears; the shouts of a score of people. All the mob from the neighbouring bars was afoot racing toward the dock gates. He stood in abject terror, his knees trembling. Someone had fallen overboard. Someone was drowning. Who? He listened intently, clutching at the scuttle, and the truth came to him; came in a burst of revelation, dazzling, blinding, pointing the meaning of her words. He sprang from the companion-way, shouting his apprehension to the winds:

"Mates ahoy! Ahoy! Where on Gawd's earth's a livin' soul! Ahoy!" Ahoy!"

He climbed the sides of a high dumb barge and looked below. It was tenantless. He jumped a watery stretch and landed safely on another vessel's deck, still giving tongue to fear: "Ahoy! Ahoy!"

A growl sounded in a cabin near at hand: "Wot's wrong? Wot's wrong then?"

"Is that Tom Chudleigh?"

"Yaas."

"Come an' swear to me. Man! get your lamp an' see it's me."

"There's no manner o' doubt abaht that. Win'bag. Yer lungs is proof. Wot's wrong?"

Saunderson slid to the barge's deck and sat down shuddering.

"Got a drink aboard?" he gasped. "I'm fair dead wiv skear. There's someone fallen into the dock. I couldn't get nigh her. You see me, Tom—you see me?"

"I see you right enough, mate. Take a swill at this."

The man's courage revived at the taste of rum and with the knowledge that he was no longer alone. The skipper eyed him curiously:

"We'd best get acrost an' see if we can do anythin'," he remarked.

"Aye; I'll go wiv you. You'll bear me out where I was when it happened."

"Right; I'll bear you out."

By the time they had rowed to the steps and come to the bridge at the far end of the lock, Saunderson had recovered. He strode with a jaunty air. The cries of the people, still gathering from the farther shipping, had no terrors for him. He hastened, with his friend, and came to the bridge where stood a dismal group of men and women, leaning over the dock sill.

A limp bundle of humanity was being lifted from a boat which lay beneath. Saunderson pressed forward. He helped to clear a space, then kneeled on the stones in search.

A woman neatly dressed in black; tall, well developed, with fluffity, bedraggled hair, rested at his feet—Mrs. Saunderson, her long journey already ended.

CHAPTER II

The Freedom of a Slave

LIKE the wolf when held at bay, so Saunderson stood his ground and fought his fight with that grim tenacity of purpose which is so characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon race when hard beset.

A glance into this man's face should have been enough to indicate his temperament. The eyes alone were sufficient to betray him, yet, when he stood to give evidence at the inquest on his wife's body, his rough eloquence so warped the minds of twelve good men, that in the end he found himself the recipient of a sympathetic rider, in addition to the usual finding. This was as balm to the man's soul; and some small compensation for the harassing period he had endured "since the poor Missis had gone under."

In this fashion then, the inquest had ended and Saunderson still was free. He alone comprehended the importance of the fact; and as he strode down the lonely road from Benfleet to Thames Haven, the haunting dread of the past few days kept him silent company.

In sullen self-communion he recognised the steady drift of circumstance, all tending to hamper his future movements, if not his freedom. Sooner or later the incendiarism and other "accidents" arising out of the strike would fasten upon him and he would be compelled to fight for his life. Again, if these matters leaked, how easy it would be to implicate him in still darker troubles. At present he revelled in a jury's sympathy, a

coroner's paternal blessing; but if matters fell into another groove—if? Rumour lies in ruts like the rain in a furrowed roadway, only until some heavier wheel disturbs the channel and draws the water in its train. What, he asked himself with outspread hands, what if that weightier wheel came down the path and left him to drown in the following torrent?

The sands were running out. The man's tether was tightening. It gripped about his middle, chafing him, causing him trouble at the girth. He saw these things and acknowledged his danger, but argued that there must yet remain some glimpse of luck; a taste, a sip, to accompany him on that journey which now loomed as inevitable in his mind.

He questioned how was it to end? By drowning, by stranding, collision—how? The *Flying Scud's* crowd had gone all possible ways. The *Bluebell's* crew had followed: first the man, Jeffries, through absurdly struggling to save a cat, then the cook, knocked overboard by a gibing boom, and now Snuffles—this last again through an oversight, a monstrous and inexplicable reversion of irony—by his own act. And there remained Micky Doolan, the boy, and Saunderson himself. Micky Doolan, too, who curiously had already survived one disaster. It was strange. He could not fathom it. He pushed the matter from him and moved resolutely towards the Haven.

The night was shutting down under a heavy pall of cloud when he reached the end of his walk. A quarter of a mile distant the *Red Gauntlet* awaited him. Her tall spars and soot-black sails stood out against the farther horizon as though carved in ebony; the delicate rigging black, taut, like gossamer threads on a silver shield. He could see the mate waving an answer to his summons, and as he paused there with fear gripping at his heart, his thoughts took shape. He raised his cap

and wiping the beads of sweat from his brow, announced his intention to start afresh—free from the conditions in which he moved, free from the shadows which haunted him now that his wife was dead, with tenfold, force.

The noise made by the boat, as she took the stones, aroused him from his brooding. He walked quickly down the causeway stepped on board, and sat down to watch their progress. The ebb was nearly spent when they reached the barge; but there was sufficient wind to enable them to creep over the tide, perhaps to reach the outer channels, so Saunderson decided to proceed, and went below.

The windlass pawls were clinking merrily when he returned to the deck and looked out across the darkening waters towards Hope Point. He remained a while examining the sky to windward, then turning to aid the mate, his eye chanced on a black-sailed brig, stealing slowly seaward on the farther shore. It was the *Tantalus*, the vessel once commanded by Sutcliffe.

In an instant the whole trend of thought was changed. The moment he sighted that dark sail-blotch lying against the Kentish hills, he was a different being; love, jealousy, disappointment paramount; caution nowhere. He recapitulated his troubles. There was the vessel whose skipper had defrauded him of fifty pounds. There, perhaps on her deck, was the man who had refused to coerce his daughter, the girl he loved, who was his wife. His anger grew. There was the man who had gone blacklegging; whom he had tried to catch; who had helped to break the back of the strike and bring about its leader's discomfiture.

Again his thoughts reverted to Susie. His wife's words rang in his ears. She had prophesied concerning his end. "You will win her and you will die, but you will win her first." Was this the opportunity of which she spoke? The old man was

away, Susie alone at Swinfleet—that he knew. It meant but a few hours delay. His wife was dead. Susie was his wife. He asked himself, dare he lose the time required to fetch her, and sat immersed in thought until the heavyfooted mate disturbed him.

"Anchor's short, skipper," he remarked and stooped to overhaul the main sheet. Saunderson rose. They proceeded to get under way.

Darkness closed in upon them as they moved into slack water. The lights crept out—white, green, red; a profusion of signals, swimming in shadow, curtained in mist, indicative of the dangers abounding at the river's exit.

The tall, dark sails of the *Red Gauntlet* shivered in the heavy air. She crept onward like a wraith, slowly but with infinite certainty, until the Jenkin was at hand and the more turbulent waters of the estuary washed her decks.

A gray, wet morning found them at anchor near the eastern entrance to the Swatch, and Saunderson rowing hurriedly to Port Victoria. A short journey thence by the early train, took him into the country at the back of Swinfleet woods; and again, by the same means, at one o'clock he was standing on the Medway terminus with a telegram to swell the coffers of His Majesty's postal service. Then out into the thin, white rain; across the misty pier; splashing down the sodden ladder, dogged, persistent, without any thought but the thought of Susie's beauty; without any desire, but the desire for her presence; and so, onward in his boat, sculling over the muddy tide and hastening to regain his vessel.

He had forgotten his dread, the closing in of those forces which hemmed him, the death of his wife. He had forgotten the scuttling of the barge and the misery of those nights when darkness reigned, and in the solitude of his lonely cabin he saw

himself beckoned invisibly in the path of the curse. He had forgotten all. The girl's bright face and gentle form hovered before him in the gray seascape—Susie, his wife, his panacea, who would cure him of his anguish. Her laughter rang in his ears. Her smiles were smiles for him. He saw nothing else, only Susie—Susie with the sweet eyes and prettily rounded form; Susie with the golden hair, soft, white hands, and gentle speech. She was with him during the slow journey through the rain, as she had been with him during the chill night just past. He pictured her in his arms once more, and listening to the honeyed dreams, his quick brain working out the ways and means, he laughed and swore and rowed with the joy of joys ringing in his ears; thinking only of the nearness of his happiness, of his escape, and all means of tracing him obliterated.

He was confronted on every hand by the results of his evil passions, yet passion held supreme control. He was face to face with an ignominious and horrible death by hanging, yet the passions which had run so long unchecked held him in bondage. He stood on the brink of a precipice from which the ground was crumbling, yet hope whispered of certain triumph, of the life he would live "out foreign," and kept his thoughts from dangerous topics until he found himself on board the *Red Gauntlet.*

The vessel lay at her lonely anchorage precisely as he had left her. The mate slept in his bunk and a smoke-black riding lamp swinging aloft, stood as a signal to the preoccupation of her crew.

CHAPTER III

Mrs. Surridge Gives Advice

FEBRUARY. A cold, gray dawn staring through the cloud-rack far in the southeast; staring at the naked trees, the muddy roads, the dripping hedgerows; tinging the mist with a touch of primrose which fell upon the cottage at Swinfleet with a fleeting gleam; then, again a falling, misty veil and the steaming earth was gray; the space where the dawn had shown, shut in, a thing of the past, gray with time—gray as the smoke driving steadily across the woods from distant Riverton factories.

All this without; but within the latticed window, a pretty vision all flushed and rumpled with sleep, staring through dancing eyes at the grayness—Susie, awakened by the first touch of dawn, searching the skies for signs of the weather.

A soft, steamy morning; very gray, very sad, very English; a white-robed figure, very soft, very trim, with laughing eyes and glorious hair, but no sadness—greeting the day which would see Jack's return; thanking the sun-god for his gift of light.

No darkness lingered now on her horizon. No hint of tears in all that cold, gray dawn. Jack was coming. His letter, folded at her bosom, told her with scandalous brevity that to-morrow he would be with her. To-morrow? Already it was to-day. True some hours, minutes, must elapse; but what of that? A bagatelle, a thing to live through with laughter as companion. Hours, minutes, trouble, danger—who thought

of these at such a time? Not Susie. The parted lips, the gleaming eyes, the fleeting dimples, all proclaimed her happiness. Night was gone. The sun had risen. Her lover was coming home.

And so all through the day, smiling joyously at her aunt's droll speeches, flushing crimson at every unexpected sound; watching Tom's exits sty-ward, when at meal times he found the English language so unutterably deficient of words, until the afternoon began to wane, the mists grew thicker, and it was time to go down to the finger post at the end of the village to await Jack's coming.

A mutiny of all subservient things occured at this. Hat pins, usually so pointed, refused to pierce the straw. A jacket, generally admitted to be useless unless furnished with two arms, appeared in silent protest with one. Buttons, intended by confiding makers to be a means of fastening, inexorably shook their heads and stayed unfast. An extraordinary and mutinous state of affairs until Mrs. Surridge came to the rescue and Susie was coaxed and patted into her fractious garments.

"La, la! there's a dear," so ran her aunt's expostulations, "Buttons? Child, your fingers shake like a passel of wag-wants.* Sleeves? Your jacket has all the sleeves you want at present. Hat pins? La! when I was a gell an' wanted to pin my hat, I pinned my hat an' not my blessed crown. La! La! was ever such a pretty bundle of confusion? Why, Susie, I do declare you make me spry again. For two pins I'd come myself; but there's your uncle, child, an' we must look after our men, if we don't want someone else to do it for us—and then—well, there, I'm sure you understand."

She caught the girl round the waist and kissed her gleaming eyes as Susie leaned there upon her motherly breast.

*Quaking-grass.

"I do, I do," she whispered. "Auntie, you're a gem."

Mrs. Surridge shook her head and continued her aid unmoved. "Maybe," she remarked after due reflection, "but it's a gem as needs a deal of polishing. A gem that has got roughed with work as would have lined a duchess. The quality have means of keeping young—powder, cause-meticks, an' such like; but I have only had brown windsor. Heigho! What we all come to! Pretty, am I? Now you get along an' don't try to addle an old woman's head with seltimental speeches. I'm done, Susie; you're beginning. I'm wore out, stale as a mildewed trotter; you're fresh as paint an' twice as wholesome. There! Get away before I want to keep you by me for a model. Get away—there's a lamb."

The evening had shut in and it was quite dark by the time Susie reached the lamp set midway between the crossroads and paused to await her lover.

The trees standing sentry beside the pathway shook their lean fingers as the soughing wind went past; a scattered fall of rain rushed up the valley and the dead leaves swept eddying across the road; then silence, the silence which inevitably follows in the track of a storm—and in the silence, footsteps thumping the sodden way.

A man came out of the darkness. The lamp at the apex of the roads threw a soft glare upon him. He walked with a stride; he was tall and wore what appeared to be a slouched hat. He came directly toward the lamp. It could be no one else—it must be Jack.

A pretty vision with flushed cheeks and dancing eyes stood there in the shadows, beckoning him on. A trim, girlish figure all curves and dimples now moving with parted lips and heaving breast to meet him. A word stole into the silence—a man's name, breathed softly as a kiss:

"Jack?"

And the answer came out to meet her: "Susie!" and again, "My Susie!"

The two met midway on the road's smooth surface and in a moment they were as one; strained breast to breast, lip to lip —not two but one, and the agony of the past forgotten.

A shiver ran through the trees towering there far into the night. But the man did not hear it, he had drawn back and was looking into the girl's pale face. "How could I leave you, lass?" he questioned.

"Oh! Jack, how did I let you go?"

Quick, half-sobbing utterances these, then again a pause, heartwrung, timorous, as though the voices of the night, the plaint of a sunless land and the swift rustle of the unburied leaves were the sounds which entranced them solely. A pause the man filled by putting back the tumbled hair, soothing it with an unsoft hand, watching the leaping colour with eyes that roved in shame; mindful only of that unwise flight of his which had fallen so heavily on the girl. "Susie!" he looked wistfully into her eyes, "How can I put it? How can I explain?"

"Don't, darling—only kiss me."

"I was a fool, Susie. I was a fool!" he reiterated.

"Then there were two of us," she decided. "Kiss me and forget."

He drew her to him, crying out passionately: "God love you! I can never forget—I can never forget."

"Now you are looking grave," she pleaded with wistful, upturned face.

"Can you forgive me, Susie?" he urged, again holding back and watching her clear, dark eyes.

"Have I ever blamed you, my husband?"

He caught her in his arms, kissing her vehemently. "No,

no," he cried, "you are too good to throw my foolishness in my teeth; but the sting isn't easily wiped out for all that. A man must prove himself. Words are like the froth on a glass of beer, all bubbles, Susie, all bubbles to be blown away by the first puff. A man must act."

She reached up and put her arms about his neck. "My dear," she urged, "are you the only one who slipped? Haven't I made mistakes? You remember my letter, dear. I told you what had happened. I told you all: can you forgive me and still call me your wife?"

He cried out with a gust of passion: "I came back to call you wife. Forgive! God love you, what have I to forgive? Nothing. Less than nothing. Your mistake was the result of mine, your trouble the result of my pig-headedness. Susie, I meant to get across the water, to get somewhere where we could be married—and to call you over at once. But my plans fell awry. I couldn't send for you."

"Dear, I know it—now I know it. At first——"

He broke in with a quick note: "Aye; but it all came from my false step. I had no right to run—and yet, you remember, I had no other chance of undoing the wrong I had done. Fear of death stared me in the face. I though they would hinder our marriage. Susie, I am telling you now what I have learned with time. It seems almost like an excuse; but you know we were in front of two puzzles and I thought my only chance of winning the second was by getting time.

"It sounded all right; but it fell all wrong. I knew it directly I saw my boat was gone; I knew it more certainly when we were hustling through the fog and that silent death came smashing into us; I knew it better when they picked me up and carried me away to Montevideo. Trust me, I saw it all then. I saw what a fool I had been. It was just ghastly.

Every day we were going farther away, every day the possibility of our marriage was put back two. My dear, I got to curse the sunrise. The sea maddened me.

"Tssss! Never a sail, lass, all the way out. Never a chance of sending a line—days, weeks, months of solitude, till we reached the Plata and I was free to join a boat for home. It was on that passage I learned to see straight. Anyone would. Even a fool. And so I came back to Abbeyville. I came back to tie the knot we'd left untied, Susie—and then —"His voice took a sterner note. He ceased and, drawing the girl close in his arms, questioned: "You can bear it? You are brave now, sweet?"

"I can bear anything, Jack. We are together."

A tremulous answer, and almost tearful voice; then her head nestled on his shoulder and again he smoothed the tumbled hair with that unsoft hand she seemed to find so gentle.

"We've got to face it," he announced at length. "Dunscombe wasn't killed by me—I need not tell you that—but the warrant is still out against me. I must surrender and stand my trial if need be, and Saunderson will be charged."

She looked up swiftly at this: "Then you believe that too?"

"Tony Crow's evidence, so the lawyer says, would hang a dozen Saundersons."

The girl's eyes filled, she buried her face, crying out: "Oh! it is awful—awful! Jack, how could I——"

And again he soothed her. "Forget, forget!" he begged. "There is nothing else to do, only to forget and settle down to fight."

"See here," he continued, speaking with young assurance, "I have arranged everything. This morning before it was light I came into Abbeyville and got into the place Tony had

fixed up for me. I am going to stay there so as to be near you, Susie, while we are working up the evidence.

"Tony Crow has been at it ever since I ran, but he tells me that it was only the other day that he came upon what he wanted. It appears that the day before Dunscombe's murder, he had asked Saunderson to take a small box to one of the Riverton shops for repairs. Saunderson forgot to leave it. It was in his pocket that night on the sea-wall, and there he lost it.

"That with the evidence of the girl, Dolly Crassley, will be sufficient to clear me. Mr. Sherren is certain of the result and so am I. There can be no doubt about it, for you see Saunderson had been discharged the night Dunscombe met me. How do we know? Bless you, the servant girl at Dunscombe's house heard the man threaten to finish his master. Oh! it is all certain enough. We need not fear. You need not fear, Susie. Why, Saunderson is on his way to Malden now. But he may never reach Malden, for the police are after him and if he gets there they will take him on his arrival. Then I shall surrender and Saunderson will be charged."

He stood there so confident in his power to accomplish these matters that Susie bowed to the influence and smiled back at the eyes watching so passionately her own. At that moment it seemed that the fight was accomplished, that Jack was free, and their bridal day already on the horizon. Youth is so lusty, so full of hope—and these two were young and in love. And as if in confirmation of the notion which ran through Susie's mind, there came the man's deep voice as he stood there reading her eyes. "And then, Susie," he questioned. "And then?"

She met his look, a crimsoning flush adding to the beauty which was undeniably hers: "I am ready, darling, when you are ready to take me."

Far in the darkness overhead the trees sighed; then a swift gust swept down the valley showering upon them their wealth of leaves. Susie shivered and clung to her lover's arm as they moved for shelter. "Come in, come in," she begged. "Again there is rain and I am afraid."

"Afraid—now? Nonsense, lass. We are safe and you are mine."

They crossed quickly out of the road and entered the garden. And as they came up the path the cottage door opened and Mrs. Surridge appeared, standing in the glare of the lamp with Tom, on tiptoe, peeping over her shoulder.

"Where they hev got to I can't think no more than Adam." Mrs. Surridge expostulated, "Susie'll catch her death."

"No she won't," her husband decided truculently. "I don't mind you catchin' your death when I was walkin' out wi' you. Leave 'em alone."

At this the truant couple strolled into sight and halted at the door.

"La!" cried Mrs. Surridge with hands uplifted and astonishment written visibly in her expressive face, "La! if it isn't Mr. Elliott."

"Z' if you didn't know that all along!" said Tom with a chuckle. "Come in, Jack; come in an' welkim."

Mrs. Surridge moved ponderously to the front holding out one hand. And with the other pressed over a noticeable fluctuation in the region of her bodice she beamed a massive and unqualified approval. "Welcome's the word," she announced with an air, "from every one here plesent. Good luck and welcome: that's my wishes and many of 'em. Get in, Tom, doey get in!"

CHAPTER IV

Saunderson's Luck Changes

SEVERAL days had passed and the time coincided with that pause made by Saunderson in the Swatch. A cold, bleak day; but within the cottage at Swinfleet a voice singing merrily as Susie went about her morning tasks. Breakfast was over, and presently, at dusk to be precise, Jack would again be with her. Therefore she sang until from the window she espied a boy dressed in the nondescript uniform of the country telegraph service coming down the garden path.

He knocked on the door and stood whistling. The singing ceased as the girl opened to him. The boy stopped whistling and said in an inquiring banter: "Susie Sutcliffe?" and followed it up with a request for a match. He produced a cigarette and a telegram simultaneously and motioned with one hand to indicate his desire.

Susie closed the door without heeding him. She held an envelope between finger and thumb, staring at it with the vague suspicion of persons unaccustomed to the receipt of telegraphic dispatches. A thought came to fluster her. Was it from Jack? Was it possible that Jack would be unable to come? She tore the cover open with a sudden earnestness and saw that it was not from Jack; that it came from Port Victoria—a place of which she had no knowledge. She saw, too, that it was signed by Micky Doolan, the mate of the *Tantalus*. All this she gathered in the first flush of fear and almost before her brain

had grasped the meaning of the written words. She turned to read again. The message ran thus:

> "Accident down river. Father hurt bad. Come at once to Port Victoria. Boat waiting to take you off to *Tantalus*. Urgent. "MICKY DOOLAN, Mate."

Susie stood a moment questioning what she must do. The telegram announced definitely that her father was ill—perhaps dying. Her uncle on whom she could rely was away on a distant portion of the farm; her aunt gone on an errand to the village; Jack was at Riverton with the lawyers. Thus the girl was alone in the house with a vision of her father's death to fluster her.

She glanced swiftly at the clock and saw that it would be possible to catch the train. The knowledge steadied her. She decided that she must go. There was no alternative. The telegram appealed with the force of a command.

She rose at once and hastened to her room whence shortly she emerged dressed for the journey. With a little shiver of apprehension she took the telegram and scribbled a short note at the foot of it; then having fastened the cottage door and deposited the key in its usual hiding place when all were out on different errands, she started for the station.

. . . . . .

The sun had set behind a gloomy bank of clouds when at length Susie alighted on the dreary platform which terminates the line crossing the Hundred of Hoo. The trains had met badly, a condition of affairs she might have expected, but she felt only heart-sick at the additional loss of time. Her father, she remembered, might be dying. Nothing else appealed.

A light breeze from the southeast chased a low and smoke-like scud across the darkening heavens. The wind moaned in

fitful gusts, shaking the high railway pier which abuts on the Medway's bank and whistled shrilly amidst the slime and seaweed clinging to the gaunt legs which carried it. Susie moved out into the gloom searching for the promised boat. At the verge of the shed a man stood viewing the passengers crossing to the Sheerness ferry. When all had passed he approached the girl.

"Lookin' fer the *Tantalus* boat?" he questioned gruffly.

Susie came towards him at once: "Yes; are you sent to fetch me? Oh! how is my father—please, please tell me."

"Father ain't no better ner 'ee ain't no wuss, so fur as I can mike aat," the man replied. "M'ybe we'd best get on board. I'm abaat sick o' diddlin' 'ere. It's cruel cold, an' that's the truth."

"Tell me," she pleaded, undeterred, "that—that he isn't dead."

The man eyed her with stolid unconcern: "Dead?" he ejaculated, "Naa, 'ee ain't dead; but 'ee's powerful sick."

Susie made no further remark but hastened to the end of the pier. Here a grim flight of steps yawned over the blackness and she halted uncertain.

The man looked at her. 'You wite 'ere," he said, "'old on to the rilin' an' I'll fetch me glim to show the road."

He descended the ladder and climbed into the boat. Far away and very dim he appeared to the watching girl. The lamp threw a faint blurr and the man moved about a boat which rocked, muzzling the ladder's side. The man glanced up. At the top of the steps a shadow flitted. The whole business was a nuisance, a nuisance which, now that he faced it, seemed a trifle flustering. He had been sent to fetch this girl and had been ordered to say that her father was very sick—dying, if need be, in order to get her to accompany him.

Hitherto he had been inclined to swear at what seemed to be a wild goose chase for some other person's benefit. But now that he had seen the girl he discovered that she awed him. She was young, stupidly young for such a business. She required protection, and yet, there stood the fact that she required no pressing. He could not make her out. She seemed more of a "lidy" than that sort usually were. She was dressed in black and was undoubtedly much frightened. Well, if the skipper had a fancy for ladies it was all right. He had to fetch her. He had to interfere in nothing. Right, he wouldn't interfere; but he made up his mind, as he mounted like a dim octopus from the depths, that he would call her Miss. So—there was no longer any question in his mind. She must be Miss.

He helped her down the slimy steps without comment, and did not speak again, until the pier had long vanished and they were afloat on the shimmering waters—waters black and inky as a bath of oil; oil that reflected greasy strokes of light and hissed alongside with the noise of moving straw. Only once during their tedious journey did Susie break the silence; she begged to know how far they had still to go. The mate rested on his oars. He spoke more kindly.

"Not fur, Missy. It's bin a tidy pull; but we's more ner hawlf w'y there."

Susie shivered and drew her cloak more closely about her. The man looked up with sudden anxiety.

"Are ye cold?" he questioned; "'ere; tike my oilskin; 'tain't werry soft, an' there's no frills abaat it as I know of, but it's a good un fer keepin' aat the cold. It's turned a'mighty thick—an' the wind's dyin'."

He handed the coat and helped to wrap it about her shoulders; then sitting back to his oars continued mysteriously:

"If this gime ain't to yer fancy, Missy; w'y you look t'Bill Marley an' 'ee'll be there."

Susie faced him abruptly. "What do you mean?" she cried.

"If you dawn't know, I'm suttin' sure I dawn't, Missy."

"But indeed I don't understand you."

"Lumme!" he returned, then began to sing softly:

> "If I 'ad a mide as was so fair,
> O! U-ri-o;
> D'ye think I'd leave 'er to tear 'er 'air,
> Wen we're bound to the Ri-o Grande.'"

"Oh! don't, don't," she cried; "it isn't kind when I'm in such trouble." Her voice rang with the echo of tears, and she leaned forward a mere beggar for his mercy.

The man shut his jaws with a snap, gave an extra pull at the oars and turning to her whispered: "Lumme, I oughter known better, sling it, and mind wot I sez just now." He backed hard on his starboard scull and turned the boat's head towards a vessel which seemed to have sprung out of the night and suddenly taken its place beside them. He stood up, clutching at the shrouds. "Jump aat," he cried; "ketch holt o' my arm an' go steady."

Susie accepted his proffered help and glanced around.

"But this is not the *Tantalus*," she cried; "she isn't big enough—this is a barge."

"That's all right, don't you worrit, Missy. The *Tantalus* lies furder dahn; we couldn't fetch her in the boat—strite! No lawks!"

The girl's heart stood still. Her voice thrilled with fear as she cried out: "Are you sure of what you say? Are you? Where is my father? Tell me—tell me."

"If this ain't a go, lumme!" said the man. "Jump aboord an' we'll run 'e dahn to father in a brice of shikes."

Susie had no option in the matter, she was compelled to obey. The man spoke roughly, but that, she knew from her voyages with her father, was the language of the bargee. She guessed, too, from what he had said, that perhaps he was kinder than appeared; so putting her hand in his she looked him in the face and said:

"I believe what you say. I will trust you. Where shall I go?"

He led her aft and taking her to the scuttle, pointed down the stairs, "Right, Missy," he returned, "you trust me. There's no one dahn below—if I was you I'd go dahn—then we'll up mud'ook an' aw'y,"

"How far have we to go?"

"None so fur. You go into the kebbin' an' rest warm."

Susie did as she was ordered, and immediately the scuttle was drawn and fastened.

CHAPTER V

Mrs. Surridge Moves

EARLY in the afternoon of the same day Elliott and Tony Crow were seated in Mr. Sherren's sanctum. The two men had come in from Abbeyville to compare notes with Dolly Crossley and Micky Doolan and to prepare their evidence for the lawyer. They had been so engaged since twelve o'clock and Mr. Sherren sitting there giving directions to a junior rubbed his hands pleasantly over the web he was weaving around Saunderson. In the midst of it an altercation arose in the outer office; and as it appeared to increase the lawyer paused and struck a gong. A clerk opened the door and looked in.

"What is all that racket about, Johnson? Kindly see that silence is kept," said the master.

The clerk looked aggrieved, "I'm afraid, sir," he replied, "we can scarcely prevent it. There is a person outside who appears to be under some misapprehension. We can' t get rid of her."

"Who is she?"

"A country person, sir; tall and fat and——"

"That's a lie, young man—tall and fat indeed!" cried an excited voice from the doorway. "Trim and tidy an' respectable—that's the prescription an' don't you forget it."

Tony Crow winked at his friend. "Socks!" he cried, "yon's Mrs. Surritch."

"Mrs. Who?" the lawyer questioned.

"Mrs. Surritch, sir—Tammas' old woman; Susie's uncle."

Mr. Sherren glanced at the blacksmith and gathering more from his look than from the lucidity of his reply, turned to the clerk and desired him to show the lady in.

Mrs. Surridge waited no second invitation. In a moment she had bustled in, glared at the clerk, and stood to confront the "lawyer-man."

"Beggin' your pardon, sir, for the hintaluption," she gasped as she searched among her skirts and rolled the aspirate to the front; "I don't hold with hintalupting anybody; but there is times when it's to be excuged, an' this, hin my opinion, is one of them. Jack, my dear, this telegraft came while me an' Tom are hout, and Susie's to home alone. An' what's the result? Why, Susie's gone to see after him, as is nateral."

She crossed over and handed the telegram as she spoke; then, having assured herself that her petticoats were in order, sank into a chair and proceeded to fan her heated face.

"Gone to look after him?" Elliott repeated fingering the paper in some perplexity.

"Hit's what you might have expected of her, seein' it's Susie—an' beggin' your pardon for the trouble I'm giving," she continued without pause, "an' there would a bin no excuse for it, onlie, she says, 'Tell Jack', she says, 'an' he will folla.' So here I ham—drove in in farmer Stokeses' milk cart an' jilted to a blessed jelly with springs that are more like—sakes alive! What's wrong with you, Jack?"

This exclamation was caused by Elliott's sudden shout of dismay as he read the message. "Good God!" he cried again, "this is Saunderson's work—Saunderson, do you understand?"

"Saunderson!" Mrs. Surridge reiterated rising and glancing hastily about her.

"Saunderson sent that wire," Elliott asserted moving toward the lawyer, who had risen also.

"Nonsense, Jack, you're wrong—all wrong," Mrs. Surridge objected. "It's poor George as is hurt. It's writ plain as sucking pigs, an' Susie's gone to nuss him."

Elliott stood like one dazed. The blacksmith approached and touched him on the back, "Haund ower t' telegraft t' Mr. Sheeron, Jock; haund it ower—there's a man."

The lawyer adjusted his pince-nez and taking the message read as follows:

"SUSIE SUTCLIFFE,
c/o Surridge, Ivy Farm, Swinfleet,
"Accident down river. Father hurt bad. Come at once to Port Victoria. Boat waiting to take you off to *Tantalus*. Urgent. MICKY DOOLAN, Mate."

"Micky Doolan?" Mr. Sherran accentuated glancing over his glasses. "Why surely that is the man we have been talking to?"

Elliott broke out with a gust of passion at this; "It's a lie, a lie!" he cried. "Not a word is true. Saunderson sent that wire."

"Steady, my lad," said the lawyer.

But Elliott was moving up and down the office in ungovernable anger. "Again I have made a hash of it!" he cried out. "Again he has got to windward and left me. Micky Doolan is not mate of the *Tantalus*. He left last voyage and Saunderson sent that message to get the girl."

He gathered up his cap and reached for the telegram, but the lawyer intervened. "One moment," he said. "We will send for Doolan. He is going down river to meet a ship, you say. Very well stop him." He paused and looked at the blacksmith. "Perhaps," he resumed, "you will go down to the pier and stop him?"

Tony Crow rose at once. "Ah will," he replied. "Meanwhile ah hope your honour will be able t' fix oop a way t' collar the lot."

As he left the office the lawyer turned to Mrs. Surridge. "When did the girl start?" he questioned.

Elliott, who had been silently examining the telegram for some time, found voice at this. "She caught the midday train, sir: that's certain from what she has written on the form. 'I am going,' she says, 'by the next train to see him. I will bring him home if I can. Tell Jack and if I can't return ask him to follow me.' And, sir, from the telegram I see that it was received at 11:30. She could do it easily. Excuse me, I'm off."

"Stay!" cried the lawyer sharply, "don't court the lock-up. I warned you this morning that the warrant for your arrest is still in existence. Take this card, and if anyone stops you show it—you understand?"

"You are very good, sir, and I thank you," he replied.

"Never mind that but tell me what are your plans."

"As for that, sir, I'm going to overhaul the *Red Gauntlet*. It's easy as child's-play now we know where Saunderson is. You remember Micky Doolan saw him leaving Thames Haven last night—very well; the tide wouldn't let him get farther than the Medway and as the telegram is stamped Port Victoria, he's lying in the Swatch. If Susie left by the train we expect, she would reach Port Victoria about three o'clock, that's a certainty; then there's the row down to the Swatch where the *Gauntlet's* lying—that would take another hour. Sir, she's scarcely there yet. She can't reach much before we can overhaul them with the *Stormy Petrel*. I'll have them if I die for it. I'll find them if it's the last day's work I do on God's earth. Sir, I'm off."

The lawyer crossed over and took Elliott by the hand.

"Good," he decided. "And I think possibly I, too, may have helped in this matter. The fact is I gave instructions to the river police to keep in touch with the *Red Gauntlet.* They are not far away. Look out for them as you go down. And now, good luck. Let me hear as soon as you return. Meanwhile I will see the police again and arrange with them in the matter of your warrant. Outside you will find a cab. Take it and get along as fast as you can."

They left the office at once and drove to the pier. Here they found Tony Crow waiting outside the gate through which they must pass.

"Gude for ye, Jack, lad," he cried as he joined them and hurried to the steps where lay a boat in readiness. "Gude for ye, ma son. Ah'm coomin' wi' ye masen, an' odds the sluckit-sasser business. Wha wouldn't? Socks! Ah'm thinkin' ah've getten t' flee, under ma hammer noo. All awa, lad! Ower wi' us t' yonder tuggie. Eigh! Jack too. Eigh! Missis Surritch, what like d'ye ca' it noo?"

He gripped one after the other by the hand, shaking them effusively. His face was a-pucker with smiles. There was no fear of failure in Tony's heart. He spoke and acted as one who has triumphed, who at the end of a race was first past the tape.

They came to the *Stormy Petrel's* ladder and bestowed themselves on her bridge, where Micky Doolan stood waiting to give the signal to weigh anchor. Mrs. Surridge, who found herself now for the first time afloat, and without her husband, approached the skipper with anxiety written in every line of her kindly features. "Capting Doolan," she whispered, "what Tom would think if so be he knew where I wuz, I can't imagine no more than Adam. It seems to me that I should go.

There's no other woman of her own sect to see her straight. It's my dooty an' I'll go through with it if I die."

Micky Doolan unfastened the wheel lashing and stood ready to start. "Ut's good av ye to come," he announced, "an' as fer Tom Surridge, why he'd say the same if you ask me."

Mrs. Surridge hastened to fill the ensuing pause. "To think," she exclaimed, "as that poor lamb's bin dissuaded to go an' meet that—himage—that—well, there, what can a person call a chap with a passel o' wives like that? Sakes alive! he ain't a man. He's a Norman—that's what he is."

Elliott came along the main deck calling to them: "All ready there, Micky?"

"Aye, Jack—all ready."

"Go straight for the Nore. Don't think of anything else. We must overhaul them. Let her away."

Then turning abruptly he rejoined the crew and busied himself aiding them to stow the anchor. Mrs. Surridge watched him tearfully.

"Well," she remarked in tones that quivered, "if that ain't what I call affection, I don't know nothing about it. Some folks," she went on, addressing Tony Crow and the skipper in turn, "some folks say there aint' no sich thing. But I say it's what's at the back o' that. Ever since he were that high," Mrs. Surridge measured some three feet from the deck, "he've just wushupped the ground the gell trod on. An' now he's goin' to save her. Ah, Tony Crow, you may laugh, but Old Moore's right. Danger to a crow-ned head; wars an' rumours o' wars, wid trouble in the ager-i-culteral districs come December. All of which has come to pass. And if that plophet," she concluded with a touch of regret, "had only spotted how things would run in Febuary, I'd say as the King might do

wuss than bear him in mind next time he's ladling out them barrownices."

A voice from the men engaged forward brought her remarks to a close and the skipper turned to the engine-room gong which he smote with his heel.

"All away it is!" he cried. "Full speed, my son—full speed!"

Then with a roll of machinery and a sudden hiss of foam the *Stormy Petrel* moved from her anchorage and headed down river.

. . . . . .

The day was fast closing in. Dark banks of cloud lay heavily massed on the horizon. The wind was failing and when at length they reached the Jenkin the night was fully come. But now the moon crept through the eastern banks and hung there red and angry to mark the driving scud. A stern night; a night of presage and warning to all those huddled craft lying at pause waiting the tide which should free them.

A gale was growing out there on the heaving sea; a hint of the power, couched and dormant as yet, but flaunting hourly its approach, raced across the moon's red face until with the passage of time it had mounted from those strangling banks and looked down in misty serenity on the twisting lane of waters winding there towards London.

But the *Stormy Petrel's* crew heeded nothing of this. They moved onward, staring into the sheen, searching the river with tireless eyes, swearing, commenting. Now and again they came upon an outward bound vessel lying with flapping sails and groaning rudder in the lap of the swell. If she chanced to be a barge they steered to examine her; if not they passed unheeding.

Each man of the crew was on the look out. No one thought of sleep. Even the cantankerous firemen forgot to agitate for fewer hours, for Elliott had been among them and told his story. As nothing succeeds like success, so, conversely, nothing is so damnable as failure. And, following the law, on Windbag Saunderson there fell a growing chorus of promised vengeance. The unsuccessful leader of the strike! The bully of the river! The man of destiny and the murderer of Dunscombe —the thing was plain. Saunderson lay in the toils.

It was nearly six o'clock when they steamed past the Nore and turned to search the Medway anchorage. As time crawled on Elliott's misery increased. Susie must be with this man now. It was impossible to conceive any further respite. The mist was denser here; but what of that? The wind which should help the *Red Gauntlet* had failed; again, what of that? Was there not a tide? Was it not possible to a man of Saunderson's tenacity to hide somewhere in this labyrinthic maze of channels, creeks, and backwaters? to hide, to bide his time, and to creep away under cover of that same mist? True. But in this matter Elliott in common with the rest had failed to pierce the man's depth. They knew nothing of the force that dogged him and, had they known, would not have appreciated its value. A river man is what he appears to be. His life, his trend, his actions are of the surface. One does not suspect depths, and subtlety of thought is a thing distinguished from subtlety of action. The former is undiscussed, the latter admitted but scarcely understood.

At this moment the things which stood out were plain for all men to read, and the rest had no part among a race who speak their minds when they have anything to say, and act on the spur when anything is to be done.

Therefore they walked the bridge and main deck growling and

promising one to the other what would happen to "Win'bag" when they met, until a bright glare springing up on their eastern horizon brought all to a halt.

They had turned the vessel some time earlier and were now "sweeping" the river going toward the Nore. The moon was momentarily hidden and the estuary rolled blacker for her absence. A voice broke the silence:

"Ut's a boatman's signal. Arroo! if ut wass the *Rid Gauntlet*, glory be, Amin. Let her away!"

Elliott approached the skipper, "Steady, Micky!" he cried, "Maybe it's the police. Steer for her, my son; steer for her."

"Whisht! I'd clane forgot them. Right; we'll take a look."

He put the wheel over and the tug headed for the Oaze. The flare had vanished yet they crept on in silent expectation, waiting, as Micky said, "fer the end av things," and straining their eyes with the elusive light.

Then again the flare grew bright and they saw a small blotch lying on the swell; a little smudge of grayness thrown into bolder relief by the flaming oil. There was no longer need for doubt. It was a boat, possibly the boat for which they searched, the boat which had tracked Saunderson thus far on his journey.

The *Stormy Petrel* crashed on without pause. They passed a barge lying under the tail of the sands and hailed her:

"What d'ye make of yonder light?"

"A boatman wanting a pluck belike."

"Aye, so I thought."

"A dirty night's lying behind that swell, skipper."

"You're right. S'long."

"So long, matee."

They crept onward and in five minutes were slowing engines besides the flare which again burned to mark the position. Then a voice came out to greet them: "Tug ahoy!"

"Hello! What boat is that?"

"Thames police. Where are you bound? Give us a pull up."

"Aye, my sons. Jump aboard. We were lookin' fer yez—jump aboard."

The crew clustered about them as they reached the deck; their questions fell in a rugged stream:

"Hast seed the *Red Gauntlet?*"

"Wheer in Gawd's name is the *Red Gauntlet?*"

"What of Saunderson?"

Then Elliott came forward and displayed the card he had received and the inspector took up the halting answer.

"So you are Jack Elliott! Ah! it's well you have that note, lad. The *Red Gauntlet?* Yes. She's away for Malden—bound up the Black Deep as fast as the wind will let her. We can do no good here. They will stop her when she arrives."

"Saunderson will never go to Malden," Elliott broke in with a gust of passion. "He has stolen the girl away from her home. He will never go there now he knows we are after him."

"Stolen the girl—again? Ah! then that's what he was doing lying around in the Swatch this twelve hours. Good. We can save the girl—if the skipper here is game to run a bit outside his owner's orders; but the man will have to be ashore before we can touch him."

"Is that so?" Elliott questioned.

"With my powers I can go no farther."

"Begorra!" Micky Doolan asserted, "thin I don't think much av yer warrant annyway. Whhat'll we be afther?"

"Get him ashore, my lad. Persuade him to land." The inspector came near and tapped him on the shoulder. "Persuade him to land, cap'n, and you shall see what you shall see."

Micky Doolan took his meaning and struck vigorously at his own outstretched palm. "We will that," he cried. "Arroo! lave ut to us, sorr—lave ut to us an' say where you want me to stheer."

"Let her away for the Deeps, my son," he returned, "for at dusk the *Red Gauntlet* was flapping along this side of the Mouse, heading for Barrow Deep."

A chorus of noisy speech drifted up from the men waiting beneath the bridge as Micky sprang to the wheel and punched the gong.

"Sorr, you're the foinest man I've seen this soide av Kilkkenny," he announced. "Full speed, me son, let her out."

The *Stormy Petrel* swept across the estuary, wallowing with the sullen splash that accompanies a rolling vessel. No one spoke now. Each man knew that it was but a question of minutes before they came up with the chase; and each man hugged his own pet theory of punishment.

The night was less dark. A misty sheen lay across the distant sands, hazy, white, indefinite in the eye of a scud-veiled moon; the swell showed up in serried lines of shadow, like the ranks of an army moving across a sun-lit plain. The song of the surf came down to greet them; the drone of the pulsing engines, the flap of paddles incessantly churning the gray river—these were sounds accompanying them as they came within range of that green light swinging so slowly across the Channels.

CHAPTER VI

Bill Marley

MEANWHILE the *Red Gauntlet* was under way and Saunderson, standing silent at the wheel, steered for the Deeps.

For twenty-four hours he had lived a new life; hope had returned to him, he had dreamed dreams, seen visions and imagined that his luck was changing—his luck, the thing which had baffled him all these months, had changed. Susie was on board. He had won. With Susie he argued that his life, his future was safe. He swore it as he watched her coming alongside, swore it, as, without any great persuasion, he saw her descend into the cabin. At that moment he walked on air. But as they picked up anchor and started toward the goal he had in view, a new thought came to trouble him. He had overshot the mark. Hours had elapsed, and the conditions so favourable when he formed his plans, had already taken a new turn to baffle him.

Two facts presented themselves as he came from his stealthy pause in the Swatch. The wind was failing and Fisherman's Gat lay full in his track.

The signals flaunting in the gray dome overhead pointed with remorseless irony to a dying breeze; the scud moving so swiftly from the southeast; the hollow lap of the undriven wavelets; the whang and flutter of sails towering far into the night—all were indications a tyro could hardly misinterpret, certainly no sailor could misread.

A calm awaited them. A calm, a forced detention perhaps in the vicinity of the Gat itself. It was a hindrance of which he had not dreamed, a thing altogether small and too unworthy to have required anticipation. And yet it faced him.

At first these matters loomed only vaguely in the man's imagination. They had appeared as untoward incidents too disagreeable to contemplate with serenity; but with time, they grew, and when presently the barge drew past the light sweeping from the Nore and he learned precisely how slow was their progress, the rememberance of Susie's presence and the aid she could give him, were nearly obliterated by fear—fear induced solely by the fact of a failing breeze.

He stood on now in sullen hope; passively watching Dame Nature's signals and marking the flight of time. Nothing he could do would alter the conditions. He dared not turn tail and run for the Medway and he dared not anchor for fear of pursuit. Thus, in the tardy hour of his triumph, when circumstance had appeared to smile more favourably upon him, he found himself again thrust into the position he dreaded perhaps more than all on earth.

He stamped on the deck, thinking grimly of his monstrous luck. A recollection crossed him and he swore. The mate, a noisy, truculent, and uncivil ruffian, a man not likely to be troubled with a delicate conscience, had manifested signs of disapproval while they were getting under way. What had come to him, Saunderson could not guess. It was curious. Chks! He threw the incident to the winds and giving his attention again to the compass, watched until they crept like a phantom to a position opposite the Mouse.

Night brooded heavily on the face of the waters; a solemn night, turgid, lacking breath, and painted at intervals by the green flare flung by the lightship. It was quiet too; quiet as

the buoys marking the Channel: nothing could have been less opportune and to a man of Saunderson's type, nothing more appalling. The scud raced through space revealing fleeting gleams of moonlight. There was wind coming, a whole potful from the southeast—meanwhile there must first ensue a calm.

The wind slowly failed. The lightship seemed chained abeam. They sagged onward—a mile, perhaps two, with whanging sprit and flapping sails, then at about midnight there came the knowledge that the remaining hours of darkness must be passed within sight of the sands.

Saunderson's mental torture increased as he stood there steering, gazing furtively at the puny wavelets, noting his distances, and recognising the steady drift of events. It was monstrous. It was devilish. Why had he been thus singled out, marked down, and pursued? What had he done to deserve it? He had done nothing—nothing. He called God to witness that what had happened had not been of his ordering. Events had grown precisely as this calm was growing He had no volition in the matter. No one had volition—the thing was an accident, beyond his control; fashioned perhaps by the very force which now conspired to lay him by the heels. What could he do? What could anyone do? Nothing—nothing.

He stared into the depths, muttering, questioning, listening; until a faint cry fell upon his ears. Far off it sounded, far off and resonant, like the clang of a distant gong. He glanced about, and for an instant his pulses throbbed to the memory of another cry; then in an instant, and with a flush of joy, he recollected Susie's presence in the cabin. It was Susie who cried to him; Susie, his wife, before whose presence the chimeras which so oppressed him would disappear. She was his. He argued that his other wife being dead, Susie was his wife.

She had come without any protest; she would forget the past, and presently would love him. And he? There was no need to wait. His love was hers; he had given it—in blood, in tears, in sweat, in gold he had given it and she was his. No other living soul could claim her now.

A swell heavier than those hitherto encountered, interrupted the seething thoughts. The barge lurched far to windward and fell back in the trough with a dismal clang. Saunderson stared into the murk; the noise jarred his nerves. He shouted to the mate to pass the lee vang forward and watched to see it done.

Marley executed the order, then, leaning against the rail, looked at his commander.

"Simes to me," he remarked, "we'd best dahn kellick—there ain't enough wind to blow aw'y a mosqueta."

"I don't anchor here," Saunderson replied gruffly.

"W'y not, Skipper?"

"What in flames is that t' you."

The mate stared. "'Tain't much suttin'ly," he returned. Then crossing the deck he lounged against the vang fall, and commenced whistling one of the only tunes he knew:

"We're bound to the Rio Grande."

Saunderson bore this for some time; but when Marley entered on the fifth stanza, he grew impatient. "Stow that!" he shouted. "Who in thunder wants to hear about U-rio?"

The mate chuckled. "You're as bad as a south-Spainer, Skip," he cried out. "None of 'em can stand w'istlin' in a cawlm. They s'y it brings ill luck."

Saunderson cast his eyes up wind. "Luck an' you be everlastingly damned!" he roared. "What d' you know about such things?"

The mate maintained his careless attitude. The sound of

wrath appeared to amuse him, still he looked up to explain. "Don't know as I know a lot," he said; "but I mind a cise as struck me funny. We're goin' round the 'Orn. I'm in a Yank, a reg'lar 'ot un; an' just as we're drawrin' dahn to Staten Island, we drop inta one of them smokin' souf-easters. Blow! Lumme, it'ud a blowed the roof off a cive—fer three d'ys it would. Then comes a cawlm, just fer all the world like this, an' we lie slammin' abaat fer a tosty spell.

"There's a cove at the w'eel one d'y, w'istlin' a toon to pawss aw'y the time. The old man come on deck. Gor'me! 'ee's a lush-bag, that skipper—'ee'd a drunk the Trider dry in a 'our. Simes us if 'ee'd 'ad a skeer sometime; anyway up 'ee comes to the bloke at the w'eel, an' splits 'is scull open wi a knuckle-duster.

"The cove lies dahn. 'Ee don't ever get up any more, an' the skipper, wot wi the drink an' the skeer, goes flamin' dotty, an' that night, wen it's uz dawk uz the inside of a drine, 'ee tikes a walk aat into the sea, an' drahns."

The mate chuckled at the rememberance. He came a pace nearer and continued: "Shikes! 'ee were a beauty, 'ee were. Too bad to drahn, 'ee were. 'Ung floatin' abaat fer three d'ys on end, then the mate aats boat an' limbers 'im to a old anchor shackle, an' 'ee slumps."

Saunderson watched his companion, but made no sign. He noted that Marley was already occupied with their near approach to the sands, and was content to follow his gaze.

The Mouse lay glinting in the tricky moonlight. A wreath of foam curled high across the barrier. Saunderson fumbled with the wheel, growling over his shoulder: "Ease off your sheets! Let 'em flow. We'll run her in an' take her up the Swin."

The mate laughed aloud. He shouted in disdain. "Take

'er up the Swin—will yer? Where's the wind to mike us run?"

"There's a breeze comin' up. The moon's scoffing the dirt." The skipper held his hand aloft feeling for the breeze for which he prayed. Marley did as he was ordered; but the *Red Gauntlet* sagged on unheeding. He commented on the fact gruffly, as one who had predicted precisely what was happening.

"Tole ye so. Simes uz if our luck's goin' to shove us a top of the san's. Better let go the mud'ook, Skipper, an' go an' look awfter yer disy dahn aft."

A noise had reached the mate's ears while they argued. Saunderson remained staring up channel in the direction of the Gat. He seemed to have forgotten, but the mate urged the matter with a tinge of impatience. "Skipper," he cried; "wot abaht 'er dahn aft. I don't want nothin' to do wi it; but square's square, an' if it ain't square w'y it's round, an' that's strite."

Saunderson turned on him with an oath: "Get you out of this. She's my wife, " he growled.

"Garn!" said the mate. "'Oo are you gettin' at. An' she come aboord t' find 'er father. Garn! skipper—try it on Spuds."

Spuds was the dog who hung close at Marley's heels, growling furtively at ever lurch. Saunderson turned to look at his mate. He measured himself against this new force; this inexplicable and obtrusive addition to his burdens, and found he confronted a man as heavy as himself, as tall; a man who had the look of one who understood the use of his hands. He had nothing to say, but Marley added with ready sarcasm: "She might be yer wife, b' the w'y ye treat 'er. Locked up in the bloomin' kebbin uz if she'd pison the Thames b' lookin' at it. Let 'er aat. Cawn't ye 'ear 'er bellerin'?"

Saunderson turned impatiently forward. "Let go the anchor; wind in on your brails," he ordered. "We're goin' down tide—straight for the sands."

"A course we are," said the mate. "In another minute we look like bein' a bloomin' beacon on the san's. Ho, yus; I'll dahn kellick right enough. Then we'll 'ave yer dicky bird up, an' 'ear 'er cheep." He went forward at once and Saunderson unfastened the scuttle and descended. He decided that he must gain Susie's sympathy, persuade her to aid him; then together they might face the mate with a refutation of his suggestions. The noise of his approach aroused the girl, and she rose to stand beside the cabin table. Saunderson halted at the foot of the ladder to watch.

She was very beautiful. Her flushed face and dancing eyes; the ruffled, golden hair straying about her forehead, and the easy pose of her graceful figure, made a picture which instantly drove from the man's mind those troublesome questions which would not allow him rest. Again he only saw Susie; again her beauty intervened and put to flight his dread; again, as he watched her, his wife's words recurred: "You will win her and you shall die." He had won. He advanced to meet her with outstretched arms.

"Susie," he cried in quick, half-gasping tones; "I had to lie to get you here—because—I could not stay. My wife is dead. You are my wife. Come over and talk. You look fair lovely, lass. Come over an' talk."

The girl made no answer; she shrank into the farthest corner of the cabin, watching him in terror. Saunderson halted near the stove.

"Come," he begged. "All is fair in love—an' you know I love you. I did what you asked me about father. I married you. You promised to come to love me wiv time. Now my

wife is dead an' you are my wife. Don't you see I can claim you? Can't you understand that at last you will be able to come to me wivout talk from any living soul? Can't you see it? You're not sorry—Gawd's life, you're not sorry? Susie, I've put it plainly—come over an' talk."

He paused, extending his arms for her; but the girl's courage had returned. She broke into the pause without hesitation.

"I am not your wife," she cried; "you have lied to me, you have cheated me; you have done everything to wreck my life, and now——"

Saunderson's voice leaped upon hers, overlapping it, drowning it. "Stop!" he shouted. "Don't say a word more until you've remembered what happened first. Stop! You too played me a dirty trick. Susie, you made game of me before my mates; you refused to trust me when I begged for time—but I love you. Child! I love you and I'm ready to forget all, if you will agree to play it square in future. Wait! Let me say my say. It isn't every man that would do as much; but I do it, an' I do it because I love you. Lass! you can score my face if you will; you can wipe your pretty shoes on my chest if you want to; you can do as you like with me—only don't speak hastily; don't say things we may wish forgotten. Gawd love you, Susie; if I can't make you happy, I'll die," he reiterated the sentence very solemnly. "I mean it; I'll die."

Twice she had attempted to break in on his words; but on each occasion he raised his voice and she was compelled to listen. Now, as he paused, she turned upon him with an angry gesture. "Silence!" she cried. "How dare you talk to me of love. I am not your wife, and even if I were, do you think I would consent to live with the man who killed Dunscombe?"

She flung the words at him with such headlong passion, that

for a moment he failed to grasp their meaning. Then his face darkened his eyes took a savage glint, and he moved slowly toward the table like a man on the edge of a seizure. "What's that you say?" he mumbled slowly, "what's that—you say?"

She turned on him with a voice that rang sharply in the small cabin: "I say that Tony has discovered it all. I say that Jack has returned. That Jack, who was accused of the murder you committed, has come home—that he will be set free and that you will be arrested when you reach Malden—if not before."

"Ah-h-h!"

The man breathed through drawn nostrils. He stood like a pointer scenting game, quietly stiffening. He gripped the table edge with both hands and waited in silence, searching her with his eyes.

At length, moving stealthily towards her and speaking with obvious difficulty. "Wait!" he ordered, and for a moment maintained the silence. Then again, still very intent on the cowering figure he faced, watching the tears that welled—

"So you have heard that, have you? An' I have to thank Tony Crow for it too. Tony Crow seems bent on botching his hand—and mine.

"Arrest me—will they? At Malden—is it? Nay, lass, they will never arrest Jim Saunderson. Mark me!" he continued, his voice growing in power as his brain took grip of the situation, "mark what I tell you. They will never take me anywhere. Whish-h-h! Elliott has come home—has he? I am to be taken at Malden—am I? Susie, you don't know me. Flames! What d' you think I am? A fool?"

The man's voice rose, but there was no snap in it. His face became flushed and white in turn, but he crept towards the girl, staring at her, begging with his eyes.

"Come here!" he whispered. "No; I'll not hurt you. You're my wife. I'm done."

He seemed to relapse into a species of lethargy. He had forgotten their position; he had forgotten the sullen mate banging with ropes on the hatches; his thoughts were whirling amidst the scenes through which he had come. He marked the fact that it was for Dunscombe he was to be arrested, and into the back of his mind there stole a hint of the irony of the situation—he who was wanted for the passing of Snuffles. And Tony Crow had set this matter in train. Tony Crow, the man who had taken Susie from him when he had won her. He glanced up and caught the girl's eyes fixed upon him, and in a moment the desire to stand well in her remembrance mastered him.

"So you think I killed Dunscombe, do you?" he questioned evenly. "Wrong, Susie, wrong. I didn't touch Dunscombe; but I know who did."

"Then you are accessory and equally to blame," she rapped out.

"And I'm not accessory," he articulated grimly.

"If you knew it you——"

"Wait! I didn't know."

She faced him in silence and he went on:

"I had my suspicions; but I didn't know, not till I met yon singed man, Tom Goram, in hospital. Ever heard his name?"

Susie signalled assent.

"Very well, the singed man's dying. He was hurt that night when Dunscombe's house fell. An' he told me. I'm called in to see him. So he told me. And it's taken down, signed, and witnessed. It's evidence."

His voice leaped a moment to the old key: "Tom Goram—he killed Dunscombe—an' if Dunscombe had served me as

he served Tom Goram, I'd have killed him too—killed him if I swung for it. Why? Why? Gawd's truth, because he made a cripple of Tom Goram and a slut of his wife—that's why, if you ask me, Susie."

She looked up, her face quivering, but Saunderson went on without heeding:

"You think I didn't know of Tony's fossikin' and suspicions," he jeered. "Chks! d'ye think I'm a fool? Think I have no eyes? But I had lost the box the blacksmith gave me and I wanted to find who had it—that's why I couldn't speak, you understand?

"Well, Tom Goram had it. He'd stole it. And, if it's news to you, he dropped it the night Dunscombe met his death —dropped it nigh the ditch."

The man's voice had grown in strength. He spoke with renewed grip, facing this matter which it seemed necessary to explain; but behind the tone there lay a touch of self-pity very difficult to recognise and keep silence. The girl essayed to speak, then with a swift turn broke into tears.

"It is terrible," she faltered, "and it may not be true—how am I to know?"

"As Gawd is my Maker," he cried out, "it is the truth. I tell you because I want you to judge me fair; because I wouldn't have you so ready to fling hard words at the man who is your husband."

Again he relapsed into silence, his brain busy with the sequence of events as they appeared. Dunscombe's death, Elliott's flight, his own marriage with Susie, his wife's return. Tony Crow, too, had added his quota. It seemed that he had set the police on his track and that meant, that meant— Aye, it meant all things to Saunderson, but for another happening; it meant arrest, sentence, death, but on another count.

He glanced swiftly about the cabin and caught the girl's eyes resting on him. The thread snapped. He advanced a step to meet her.

"Come here, Susie," he whispered. "Let me hold you once. It's the end, Lass. Say one word to me an' I'll go away to where I came from. Tell me that you would have got to love me if—if it hadn't been for this—this——"

He mouthed a sentence but no sound came. Susie gazed, half fascinated.

"I can't," she shuddered. "It is awful—awful."

"Have pity! Gawd love you, have pity."

The plaint touched her sense of justice. If he suffered now what had been the lot of those against whom he fought. She cried out abruptly:

"Had you pity? Had you pity on Jack, on father, on anyone? Had you——"

"Wait!" his voice leaped into the old key. "Had they any for me? Did father care two straws what came of me so long as he had my money? Did Elliott care? Did they stand by me or did they fight me? Chks! Elliott has returned. What odds? No odds, for you are my wife. You dare not fight me—you dare not go back on me—now."

He moved towards her, holding out his hands, but she retreated, urging him to leave her. "I can't," she cried. "I am not your wife. You married me when your wife was alive; therefore I am not your wife."

He scarcely heard. He continued to move after her.

"Susie, for Gawd's sake don't shrink from me. I can't hurt you. I can't crunch you in my arms, for you are my wife an' I love you. Understand what that means? Chks! They've got their nails into me," he pointed with his finger, "one there—there's no wind; another there—we're at anchor; another

there—the Gat's ahead of me. It's the curse, lass. Gawd love you, say a word to help me—one——"

The girl broke into a passion of tears and Saunderson caught her in his arms. The dull eyes, so heavy with the weight of his sins, so heavy with the knowledge of what was before him, stared mistily at this girl, lying shuddering and weeping in his grasp.

"I loved you—I loved you," he cried, fierce with triumph. The words fell in a rugged stream. They fell hot, striking her with hammer-like blows. The man's agony mastered him and he cried out again: "It was for you I fought, for you I suffered, for you, as Gawd is my Judge. If I had seen you first, before she came, it would have been different. Have pity! One word —can't? Ah! the odds are against me. Always were. The curse, Susie—the curse——"

A despairing cry broke from the girl's lips as he leaned over her, crushing her to him, marking the leaping colour, the frightened eyes; then a footstep sounded on the deck overhead, the scuttle was flung back, and the mate descended. Susie's voice had reached him while he was still busy with the sails and instantly recognising there was trouble afoot, he left his work and came aft.

"Naa then, skipper!" he shouted. "Fair pl'y's a jewel. Drop it an' come on deck."

Saunderson set the half-fainting girl on the settee and turned to face the new force. There was in his eyes the look of a tiger when he turns from his mate to fight an enemy lurking in the background; but he moved up the ladder averting his gaze, without answer, and came to the boat trailing astern. He stooped to unfasten the painter and again the mate stood beside him, hampering his movements, questioning his motives. He desired to know precisely what the skipper intended, and Saunderson looked up with a growl.

"She's going ashore. There's bin some mistake," he announced.

"Oh! An' 'oo's goin' to tike 'er?"

"You are."

Marley swore vigorously that he had no intention of playing the goat any longer. He added the information that it was twelve miles or more to Southend and that the tide still ebbed. He expressed it as his opinion that the skipper had gone balmy, soft in the tater; but Saunderson took no heed. He lashed the boat amidships and proceeded to unbuckle his belt. He held it out to the mate, saying;

"It's yours if you land her—safe, mind—at Southend. It's yours wiv what's in it."

The mate stared.

"'Ow do I know wot's in it?" he questioned at length.

Saunderson moved to the binnacle. "I'll show you," he said.

Then he unfastened the leather strap about a thin, flat bag, and opened it. "See?" he remarked. "Gold. One, two, three, four pound—some odd shillin's. I have no use for it—d'you take on?"

Marley watched him out of small eyes. "It's a gime I don't like," he said. "Wot's be'ind it all? I don't want to be pulled up fer no kidnappin' gime. Wot abaat the gell?"

"Go an' ask her. Here, take this. Give it to her an 'tell her she's to give that loose gold—same as I counted out—to you when you've landed her, safe—safe, mind!" he growled the iteration. "The distance is nothing. The night's quiet—smooth as oil. The tide won't hurt you, under the Sands. I'll wait here till you come back. What do you say?"

Marley considered the matter from this new standpoint. He turned on his heel and approached the cabin.

"If the gell says yes," he decided, "I'm there."

Saunderson moved forward. He stood in the shadow of the mast awaiting the result. He knew what that would be. Susie would go. He would be left alone—alone to——Chks! the mate was coming up the steps. He saw him stoop over the boat. Already?

He muttered grimly that they intended to lose no time—not a minute; then stood gripping the brails, marking their movements, fearful lest even now something should happen to mar the plan he had formed—to mar it! Pish! Susie came up the ladder. She approached the rail, looked into the boat, and stared up the misty sea. Saunderson found voice to shout at this an order to the mate: "Get a spare coat—blanket—somethin' to wrap her in. It's cold."

Marley obeyed. He returned laden and Susie stepped into the boat. She huddled down amidst the wraps. The mate followed her. He took his seat, shipped his sculls, pushed off. They moved out into the gray-white sheen.

Saunderson stood alone now by the mainmast watching the circling ripples.

CHAPTER VII

A Challenge

AN HOUR Saunderson stood like one fascinated by the seascape; a sentinel on duty with no knowledge of what that duty was.

The silence whelmed him. A certain number of minutes ago there had not been silence; but now the silence had come and it whelmed him.

Out there a boat moved steadily over the tide. In it was the mate taking home again that girl whose presence had become a burden; whom he had sent ashore lest further trouble should ensue; lest by chance her presence prevented him moving out of the danger zone, carrying into effect that plan he had formed. Plan? What plan had he? Had he a plan, or was it——

Saunderson passed down the companion stairs and lifted to lips his medicine.

. . . . . .

Again an hour had sped. Saunderson acknowledged it; yet something hindered him; something, the gist of which was lost as that boat was becoming lost. He was unable to decide what it was. It appeared that he desired to move out, to proceed across that turgid stream and escape from the forces by which he was hemmed.

But the river chained him. The calm, his fears, his irresolution chained him and he remained inert. Once he told him-

self he could have moved; now he was somnolently content to question whether if he moved any result would ensue.

The river gurgled in his ears. It played about the leeboard, stirring it, throwing up little rills. The sound annoyed him. It interfered with the sequence of his thoughts, prevented him seeing precisely how fast the boat moved out there amidst the oily stretches. He crossed over and discovered that a dead dog had fouled the chain. He leaned over with a boat hook and laboriously pushed it away. Again there was silence.

. . . . . .

The boat faded from sight. Her outline could be seen now only when the Mouse swang round; then for a moment it stood out upon the greenish sheen, like a log amidst the grass. He marvelled at its immobility and remembered that it was distant, distant as those acts of his which had borne such curious fruit. He wondered why men called it fruit, why so much depended on what we do, why the boat hung there so long, a mere blotch to pester him; why that greenish tinge recurred so frequently and persistently.

The river ran steadily onward throwing little whirlpools with a vortex of mud—mud like smoke which rose steadily from nothing. As he had risen from the dregs of humanity, from the scum of life seething in the whirlpools of our cities, so the mud rose from the river's depths, without apparent cause, without any object but to smudge the seascape. Without volition, as in his case, so it drifted into silence—drifted on the path he trod, to oblivion, forgetfulness, death. Toward the one certain event all men must face.

Saunderson faced it now. He stared into depths more profound than those over which he leaned; but irresolution chained him. He could not think nor decide; yet he shouted

aloud that it was the one thing to do, and straightway fell into vacuity.

His medicine revived him.

. . . . . .

When next he came on deck the boat had vanished. He missed it with a thrill of anguish, discovering for the first time that he was alone. The silence became intrusive. It stepped out of the void, as that triangle of lights down there was coming from the void, passed down the shimmering distance, and fell upon him like a cloak; as presently the shadow which accompanied the triangle would fall upon him like a cloak.

The man rose and moved towards the companion. The small clock in the cabin skylight raced abominably. It spoke of the flight of time. It cried out to him with an idiotic beat which coincided strangely with his beating heart. It annoyed him. He crossed over and silenced it forever.

He crept into the cabin, deciding that he must wait, that it was necessary the mate should have time to rejoin him, and lifted again his medicine.

But he did not drink. A sound crept in upon him—a long and dismal cry like the hoot of an owl. But Saunderson knew that no owl cried there. He knew definitely where that sound had birth, and paused there, bottle raised, a look of horrible dread covering his features.

He set the bottle down, a swift movement, and slid up the companion; but here he went slowly, lifting his head by degrees from the scuttle as though he would see this thing which came to pester him, see it and smash it as he had smashed the clock.

A triangle of lights approached; the apex of which was white. The steady flap of paddles increased in volume; on one wheel was a loose float grinding in a fashion which indi-

cates either carelessness or cheeseparing. To Saunderson there was but one meaning to it all. This boat which called with the voice of an owl and rattled with a float in her starboard sponson was the *Stormy Petrel;* the vessel on which he had fought Elliott that night at the edge of the Gat, the vessel owned by the firm which once had acknowledged Dunscombe as its lord—Dunscombe for whose murder it appeared he stood charged.

Saunderson moved into the shadow of the mizzen and stood watching. He acknowledged that this tug was the *Stormy Petrel* and questioned audibly what it wanted there; but remained irresolute, staring at the swirling river until the flapping ceased and a voice cried out—the voice of Micky Doolan:

"*Red Gauntlet* there! What ho there! *Red Gauntlet.*"

Again Saunderson relapsed into that lethargy which had troubled him. His mind had been occupied with the trend of events, with the stealthy approach of that thing which dogged him, but with Micky's voice a new danger sprang. Micky Doolan in the *Stormy Petrel?* Ah! in that case he had botched his hand. Micky Doolan Tony Crow, Jack Elliott—they were one—and Elliott had returned. He acknowledged the fatuity of waiting, yet waited growling and apprehensive of action.

A voice came up to him from the boat rowing now to board him. Who's voice? Chks! what odds. The thing approached manned by a crowd. A crowd—he counted them as they drew near: one, two, three, four, five, six. Six men from the *Stormy Petrel?* Ssss! his fancy played with him. It could not be. The tug had not six men in addition to the black watch. Saunderson waited there, elbows on the guard, searching the river for an answer; but the river had no answer

to give. It ran by gurgling and aswirl with eddying garbage and no hint of the truth appeared.

The boat fell alongside in the waist. The noise of oars tumbling inboard and the hum of voices as men climbed the rail awoke him and he lurched forward, truculent and vicious to meet them.

"Who's that?" he growled, "an' what d'ye want?"

A group of figures gathered round him and one touched him on the shoulder.

"Wheer's t' lass?" said a voice and Tony Crow towered before him.

"The lass—what lass?"

"Susie Sutcliffe—the lass ye stole from her home wi' lies an' blather."

Saunderson measured the group about him and answered without pause.

"The lass is not here; she's gone."

"Gone wheer?"

"Home."

"Look, ma sons," the blacksmith ordered; "see if he lies." Then as two moved away to obey he turned banteringly on the skipper.

"Cap'n Saundisson!" he said, "ah'm praad t' greet ye. Ah've bin lookin' for ye ta keep yon promise o' yourn."

Saunderson moved with an oath, but the men pressed in upon him and he was powerless. He knew now what had happened. These men, whereof Tony Crow was the spokesman, had tracked him down and meant to take him. He acknowledged that he was hemmed in, beaten; but with the advent of opposition his brain regained power. He took grip of the situation, searching for means of escape; but the burly blacksmith pressed in upon him, pinning him down to answer.

"Ah'm waitin', " he cried, "Ah'm no fu' ta the heilt wi' patience. Will ye fetcht? Or am I ta hit ye cowardly?"

"I'll fight you when an' where you like."

"Right; then we'll get ashore wi oot any more clack."

"Ashore?"

"Aye; on the sands yonder."

Saunderson turned and stared across the misty strip of intervening sea. A notion came to him. The sands were nearer the shore by a mile than where they lay. If he could reach them might he not also reach the farther stretch—the Maplins, beyond which were the Essex marches, the Crouch, Burnham, Malden and a score of places abounding with river craft and means of exit. Would he land on the sands yonder and fight? Aye, would he. He gave the answer with a rush of passion and instantly the men moved for the boat.

He climbed into the stern sheets with Micky Doolan, Tony Crow, and two others. They started for the Mouse.

And as they moved shoreward another boat, which had left the *Stormy Petrel* while they talked, came to the sands and landed her burden.

But Saunderson knew nothing of this. He sat there staring into the sheen—the sheen which hung wavering over the sands, and beyond——

CHAPTER VIII

The Issue

A LONELY stretch of unclaimed terrain, perhaps a mile in length and nearly as broad, lay in the eye of the moon where they landed. The swell rolled up to meet it and died in a splutter of thickened foam far up the slope. Little terraces of ridged sand marked the efforts of the waves, but beyond the line of refuse the bank was smooth and curved as a turtle's back.

In the near distance a light revolved. Thrice each minute it grew bright and as often waned—the pale, green glare of the Mouse shining through the mistiness. It lighted the sands with recurrent flashes and threw unstable shadows of the group struggling to beach their boat. Farther afield a second signal winked in solemn loneliness marking the presence of the Oaze. Between it and the sands it guarded, half curtained in the fitful light, lay the two vessels, the *Red Gauntlet* and the tug; and in the farther channel, moored at the edge of the Swin was a wherry. About them all the gulls swerved and fought for food uncovered by the ebb.

Saunderson stood alone. It seemed at that moment that chance opened a door for him. The men were busy with the boat—unaccountably slow in their movements; he examined the distance and found it a solitude. Before him lay that means of exit of which he had dreamed; a means by which even now he might evade the issue. His pulses stirred. He moved stealthily up the slope. The voices of the men waned. Tony

Crow stooped, apparently deep in the measurements of the Queensberry ring and Saunderson passed unheeding. He laughed in his sleeve as he noted their dilatory movements. Perhaps Tony Crow, after all, was not aching for that fight he had challenged. Chks! the men were behind him. He leaped forward at a run.

The tricky light favoured him and for a while no sound broke the stillness beyond the dull thud of his heavy passage. Then a cry rang out, sharp, tense, and instantly he redoubled his efforts.

The men were gathering in pursuit. He knew this without pausing to see. They were hurrying fast in his tracks but the advantage lay now with him. Already he had come well in view of the farther channel, and there, as though arranged by Providence to succour him, lay a wherry, quiescent at the edge of the sands. Only a narrow strip of water intervened. He could wade it on his head. Who could have left a boat in such a position? He laughed aloud. The question tickled him; but it was one he could leave for those others to solve. The boat was there and he would use her.

He came down the slope panting and at speed. In two minutes he would be in the water, in two more he would be on board. He shouted his triumph—then suddenly, swiftly drew rein.

Three forms rose from the dark line marking the edge of high water and stood to hold him.

"Stand in the King's name!"

The voice rang harshly in that dreary solitude. The men advanced; but Saunderson had already turned and was moving heavily back in his tracks. His jocularity died. He knew now why he had been permitted to land, why the men had remained so long fiddling with the boat; knew and cursed the

strategy which had drawn him on; but still he kept his head and ran as he had not run since he was a boy. A mad rage took possession of him. Somehow he would escape. No man should take him. Least of all would he surrender. If he must die he would die fighting—fighting as a man.

He came to the top of the sands and looked about him. The men were no longer visible. He stumbled upon a hollow and instantly crouched low to garner his forces. His breath failed him; the sweat poured down his face; his knees trembled from his unaccustomed effort. He lay with his chin on his arms, panting, watching, and in silence.

And as he rested, twisting in his mind the small and inconsiderable details of his flight, the crunch of sand arrested his attention and he lifted his head.

A man came slowly down the bank before him. He was alone. Saunderson cowered still deeper in the shadow. The footsteps approached. He saw that of necessity he must be discovered and rose at once to meet who came. He had regained his breath. Some one barred his passage. He stood measuring the distance, balanced, ready to spring; but the man halted and a voice fell upon the pause.

"What ho! Win'bag Saunderson as I'm a living soul. Stand out, man! stand out!"

It was Elliott who paused there in the sheeny light to mock him; Elliott who was winning again as he always won; Elliott who had returned to give him into the hands of his enemies. The knowledge stung him. Elliott! The man preferred by the girl; the man of men he hated. The strength of his enmity outweighed his discretion. He sprang forward with a snarl.

"Aye," he shouted, "Win'bag Saunderson, game to fight you as he's always fought you—face to face, man to man; but now for that boat instead of the—Flames! d'ye take on?"

Elliott took off his coat and tossed it aside.

"Take on?" he cried. "God! that's what I'm here for. It's what I've lived for. It's what you are here for. Boat? Aye, if you can beat me, Win'bag, you shall have the boat. If I beat you I'll come and see you swing. You've fought me fair, have you? God's truth—stand out and begin what's never been your game. Stand out!"

The two men rapidly stripped to the waist. They stood now barebacked and without shoes, marking their distance on the soft sand. And the swinging glare from the Mouse fell upon them, painting them green.

A faint cry came over the sea and Elliott half turned to listen. Saunderson saw his advantage and instantly leaped upon him. "Lie down, dawg!" he growled and struck him heavily. Elliott swayed, but kept his feet and dodging the savage skipper hooked with his left as he passed, and Saunderson measured his length on the sand.

"Get up! Fight fair," Elliott shouted, sparring back with the calmness born of practised combat. "Fight fair!" he reiterated as the other lurched to his feet. Then again as his opponent rushed in he stepped aside and struck him to his knees.

Saunderson rose more slowly now. He stood to draw his enemy on, and for a moment, the recollection of a former encounter crossed his mind. Then Elliott had beaten him. Now if he were beaten again the end was at hand. He stepped backward, his fists raised, working in a circle to tempt this man to close. But Elliott had no intention of closing; he knew precisely what risks he incurred and danced lightly in Saunderson's track, keeping him always at arm's length.

A short interval at these tactics told Saunderson the younger man must win, unless he could reach in and stop him. He

moved circumspectly—waiting. A cloud drew across the moon; the light behind became dim. It was an opportunity the skipper could scarcely miss. He instantly checked his pace and darted under his opponent's guard. Two heavy blows reached Elliott; but again he sprang away and cut the skipper smartly over the eyes. Twice he struck before the man could recover, then with a sudden swing reached his temple and again Saunderson measured the sands.

The moon peeped out touching the scene with a passing gleam. From the edge of the tide came the monotonous cry of the gulls sweeping the ebbing channels for scraps. From the nebulous haze the winking light of the Oaze mocked at the efforts of this man who would recognise nothing, who could learn nothing that would upset the theories in which he was steeped—and yet must be taught. A moment the moon stood over them deepening the shadows, then the scud swept up and its face was dim.

Saunderson still lay prone upon his back. He raged at his ineptitude yet failed to comprehend the reason of it. He breathed more heavily now and noted the fact that Elliott stood there, cool and scarcely marked, to watch him, and he turned laboriously on his elbow.

"The boat's still there, Win'bag!" came the phrase aimed to taunt him. "What d'you say? Getting tired?"

"Tired!"

Saunderson lurched to his feet. He was bleeding profusely and trembling from those efforts of his which had failed.

"Tired?" he reiterated, "Lumme! no; not while I can see. Stand out!"

"Right."

Elliott advanced without flurry. He was as calm and unflustered as his enemy was distressed. They faced each other

again, the younger man sparring back, the elder rushing wildly in chase.

A blow fell on Saunderson's breast. He drew a long, sobbing breath and leaped forward swearing. Then Elliott tripped and instantly his foe was upon him delivering his stock of blows. They fell swiftly and for a moment it appeared that Elliott would be gripped; but again, with marvellous dexterity, he evaded the big man's clutches and springing aside delivered that deadly upper cut which so distressed his heavy opponent. Saunderson's advantage disappeared. He bent a moment to regain breath and Elliott stood to greet him.

They faced each other in dogged anger. Thuds fell which seemed to shake the stillness as the scud up there seemed to shake the moon. A moment the river was gleaming in its lustre; again it ran solemn and swift in the grayness. The noise of laboured breath and vicious oaths filled the night with jets of sound. A procession of leaping and half-naked figures mocked these two grim fighters from the sands. The men closed. They stood at grip—Elliott quiet and firmly planted, Saunderson wrecking his strength in futile bluster, swaying, panting. A minute they remained thus, poised against the skyline, then one moved from his feet, rose high in air, and fell with a thud—a sickening sound, heavy, squelching, nerveless.

A brief gleam stole through the cloud rack and lighted the scene. Elliott halted there, panting from his exertions; but he stood. Saunderson lay breathless at his feet.

Five minutes he remained as though stunned; then, dizzily and with infinite stealth, he edged toward his enemy's leg. But Elliott saw him and leaped back.

"Get up, man. Fight fair!" he shouted, and the gulls swerved high about them, screaming over the discoveries by which they lived. Saunderson maintained silence.

"The boat's mine, Win'bag; another minute and the chaps will he here. Are you game?"

The taunt sufficed. Saunderson reached his feet. He reeled where he stood, but shouted as he had always shouted: "Come on! I'm wiv you. Gawd's love! I'm wiv you to the end."

Neither man sparred now. Each faced his foe and strove by sheer weight of muscle to crush him. But Saunderson's sense of aim was gone. He pummelled the air. His blows fell on space and with each lunge Elliott dodged and cut him under the guard. The Skipper was vanquished, he was breathless, he ached in every limb, he was blind. His age, his habits, his weight, all made him an easy prey for this force which had returned to destroy him; yet still he contended, foot to foot, eye to eye, striving with the dumb patience of the brutes to fence the shower that rained upon him.

Then, suddenly, Elliott closed and once more gripped his man by the middle. A yell of anger left Saunderson's lips as he moved from the ground: "Gawd! Not that—not that!"

Quicker this time, more swiftly through the darkness, and again he lay prone.

He remained where he fell and for an hour the swinging glare from the lightship stole over the pair, painting them green.

. . . . . .

An hour, then once again the boats crept over the face of the waters carrying a man sunk in that lethargy against which he was unable to fight.

CHAPTER IX

The Two Who Sowed

SAUNDERSON lay on the settee within the small cabin which was his home.

The police who remained on board imagined that he slept, but he did not sleep; he was aware of his bonds and with a subtlety that had newly come to him, sought how even at this hour he might regain his freedom.

For some time he lay there considering this matter. There were men on deck. He could hear them walking to and fro—six steps this way, six that. The monotony of it annoyed him. He desired at that moment to silence them, yet remained quiescent until the rattle of a chain told him some vessel had come to anchor close at hand. It now occurred to him that he should go on deck and see whether they had left him a clear berth. It was his prerogative, yet still he remained there couched, ruminating, twiddling with the handcuffs with which he was bound.

He strove to draw them from his wrists, covertly, under shelter of the table; and again rested. He acknowledged after a while that a belaying pin or the windlass lever was necessary to enable him to accomplish his desire—and to reach either he must gain the deck. But while those men walked it was impossible— that he acknowledged, shaking his head, hugely alert. Then, suddenly as it appeared, the tramping ceased. Voices rose up there in the darkness; men called one to the other from a distance. "What vessel is that? Where

are you bound? Got a drink on board?" Answers came back, muffled, perplexing—Saunderson could not define the answers.

He heard the men approach the skylight and recognised that they looked down upon him. He knew that one hauled a boat alongside. He knew too that one or more presently crossed the deck, opened the scuttle and descended. He discovered that a bullseye shone across the cabin, that someone flashed it close in his face; but he remained undisturbed, silent. A dead man would have given no greater sign than did Saunderson.

A pause ensued. One whispered to the other. A voice said: "Oh, he's breathing right enough," the ghost of a voice; but Saunderson heard and understood. Then followed the movement of men crossing the cabin, ascending the stairs, shutting and locking the scuttle; again, after a minute, the noise of shipped oars, of rowing, and Saunderson sat erect.

The men were gone. All of them? He questioned this madness and set about discovering the answer. He mounted the small table, lifted the skylight, and peered out. The decks seemed empty. Across the river he caught sight of the boat moving toward an anchored barge.

Chks! Did they suppose he was dead? Did they imagine the mauling he had received was sufficient to——Chks! with hands made clumsy by the manacles, he unscrewed the skylight and, pushing it free of the clamp, let it fall backward upon its twin.

Now at length it was possible to move farther.

A box placed on the table gave him further easement. He clambered out and wriggled snakewise along the deck; then, standing in the shadow cast by the mast, examined the outlook.

The decks held no one. The small forecastle was empty—a light burning in it beside the stove. Saunderson moved more

freely. He approached the windlass lever and raising his hands brought the swivel crashing on the iron—once, twice, thrice, and with a wrench he was free. He babbled of the fact as he moved to further effort. A glance told him that if he hove in cable as men usually heave it, the noise would bring those men back in ten minutes. He leaned over the pall rack considering this and presently, with the help of a few rope yarns, had the things fast, silent as the night.

Again he babbled like a child of his strategy and swiftly wound up the anchor. So, he no longer lay still. The tide carried him outward, farther each moment from that vessel lying there with his captors on board.

He glanced up river and found that the barge was sunk in the haze. Already? He leaped responsive, chattering still of the idiocy of those thirsty souls who had captured him and given him his freedom. The light air helped him when presently he had made sail. He leaned there by the wheel, grimly fingering the spokes.

The *Red Gauntlet* sagged down river like a wraith, carrying this man to the harvest.

. . . . . .

The turgid night oppressed him. In face of that mist and streaming scud; within sound of those rolling breakers dissolving in spume at the edge of the sands, he could not think. He desired thought. In that fashion alone was it possible to arrange those matters which cried so clamorously for decision. The barge drove in the fairway, there were no other vessels about. He told himself she would take no harm and crept into the cabin seeking the silence which had become imperative—if decision were to be come at. But here the lamp burned low with a gurgling noise in its throat that sounded like a laugh,

a hideous, still-born laugh—dead at its birth. Saunderson examined the thing with eyes which denoted his extremity and announced that it cried out for oil. He essayed to trim it, unsteadily, with shaking hands—like a man in a palsy. He found a can of paraffin, unscrewed the lamp, filled it, lighted it and left the drum where it stood, on the edge of the table. It held five gallons.

Now, at length, it appeared that he had compelled a silence which was absolute. He crossed the deck and sitting before the stove asked himself what next he must do.

But now the silence troubled him. It marked his loneliness. It pointed to the inevitable approach of that fate which dogged him and for which he was unprepared. He leaned forward, staring into the fire and struggling to shut out the teeming fancies. Something he had decided to do. What was it? The idea evaded him. It passed from his brain, leaving a curious sense of aloofness which in itself was sufficient to cause him unrest. What was wrong? Why could he not decide?

He glanced up—the swift, scared look of one who sees shadows where no shadows exist.

The visions of the night were upon him, his brain clogged with ideas, tag-ends of sentences, conversations—all in fragments, broken up and mixed like the debris shovelled into a destructor.

He searched about for means by which he might piece these things together, and in the midst of a silence like the silence of death a persistent noise assailed his ears.

He lifted his face to gaze furtively over his shoulder and the mate's dog, who had approached to search the fender for scraps, fled up the steps at sight of the man's awakening.

Saunderson leaned forward. "It's the dawg," he said. Then again; "Spuds! here boy—come here." But the animal,

dreading a kick, only ran the faster, whining with fright. Saunderson groaned. The dog had turned from him now, when in his mental agony even the companionship of a brute would have been welcome to aid him in blotting out the past.

He drew his hands across his bruised and swollen face and instantly the fanciful procession commenced anew.

Thought maddened him. He could not discover the end. It approached, playing with him as a cat plays with the bird it has maimed. How would it take him? When would it take him? He muttered hoarsely: "I'm not fit. Gawd! I'm not fit. My hand was forced. Men starvin'; women in the gutter. Masters suckin' their blood— fillin' their purses wiv gold stolen from the sweat of men—stolen by competition, stolen by quibble —stolen by devilry. How could I help it? I couldn't help it. Lies! I say I couldn't——"

He glanced over his shoulder and sprang to his feet, crying out: "Who spoke? Who's there? Who says I did it for self? Lies! No one spoke. Nothin's there. Shadows an' darkness—darkness an' shadows an' lies."

He returned to his seat and sat there glaring uneasily into space, then crept to the locker and discovered his medicine. It seemed at that moment that he had nearly forgotten it; but now he took it and, stealing cautiously backward, climbed the steps and reached the deck.

The *Red Gauntlet* still lay there, sagging broadside with the tide, silent as though a plague had struck her and left her peopled by the ghosts of her crew. Saunderson stood watching, facing sands where the swell rolled a misty foam-cloud into the night. It hung wavering in the tricky moonlight, singing the requiem of the sea, red with the shade of the Maplin, white under the eye of the moon. He stared into the sheen and his wife's words rang in his brain:

"On the river when it is dark, I will be with you. In your sleep I shall be at your side, flitting unseen. In lonely roads or silent anchorages I shall be near you, driving you to that hell you are always talking of."

The memory struck him with a frenzy and he leaped from the hatches to search for a boat. A boat should be fast astern —the one boat the *Red Gauntlet* carried. He would use her and row away from this place which was accursed.

He came aft and stood in search; but no boat was there, for the mate by some chance had not returned. He acknowledged the fact, admitting that it cut him off from escape. Alone, deserted alike by God and man, he was left to meet that end of which he had dreamed and could not fathom. A moment he stood examining the shadows, shouting his fears into the void, questioning why he was debarred this one chance of escape?

But the river had no answer to give. It ran past him, gurgling and carrying on its bosom the garbage of a great town; it swept seaward, down the channels, across the sands, out towards the profound and restless sea.

Again Saunderson left the deck and crept into his small cabin. He slammed the scuttle upon his solitude and sat down nursing his medicine.

. . . . . .

And suddenly, despite the fact that an hour had elapsed, a noise awoke the brooding man. The sea had grown strangely still, the swell no longer troubled him and the noise continued— a sliding, grinding scrape, as of a boat drawn down a shingly beach.

Saunderson no longer dozed over the fire. He reached the deck shouting his fears: "What now? What now?" Ah, he

might have known it. He had reached the tail of the sands, the sands of which he had been dreaming.

The *Red Gauntlet* no longer sagged in the midst of the channel; she lay quivering and full of strange thrills, edging her way like a bird in a bath of dust, preparing for rest.

Saunderson moved about the deck as a man distraught. Forward, aft, amidships, he laboured with a pole, seeking to force his way into deeper water. He hauled the sheets to windward and stood watching. The sails flapped dismally, the barge rolled; but no wind stirred, and overhead the scud raced.

It was a travesty of all expected things. He shouted his contempt, his challenge, his unspeakable disdain; then, tired by the violence of his passion, crept into the cabin and closed the scuttle. Again he drank of his medicine. He was weary—very weary. He averred as he sat watching before the stove that never before had he been so weary. His eyes closed. For a while the man slept.

. . . . . .

A sound awakened him and he leaned back against the lockers.

The lamp swinging up there in the skylight as the barge rolled, cast shadows on the white wood deck. The table, the stove, a pendant oilskin, all swaying slowly, threw their images across him and crawled about as though imbued with life.

Saunderson sat watching, his eyes drawn, his muscles twitching. Each shadow was a living soul. Each tricky phantasy of light some companion he had known. He leaped up with a shout of fear. Great drops of sweat stood on his forehead. "Take 'em away!" he cried out. "Gawd! take 'em away."

But the motley array of haggard men and women streamed

past and stood drawn up in line to mock him. Saunderson recognised this and crept backward to bestow himself, huddled and mouthing, beside the cabin table. It seemed necessary that he leave them room to move.

"They're come," he announced with thin lips, "they're come to see me finish. Shhh! How many of 'em?" He paused to count: "One, two, three, four, five"——but the number stretched indefinitely and Saunderson drew back with a leer. "We'll call it five," he said, "five, all gibberin' like fools.

"Stand back! Stand back! Shhh! There's Lucy, an' there's Jo—Polly her name was. Mary, you slut! I never chucked you—'twere your fault. Jenny, you there? Smilin' still—waitin' to see me swing? Stay! I'm not goin' to swing. It's the Gat—the curse. Whish! stand back! Jenny, come here, come here, for Gawd's sake an' talk to me. Won't? I might have known it. Shhh! they're asleep; they'd best stay asleep forever."

He crawled to the table, avoiding the moving shadows and with a madman's stealthy movement obtained the can of paraffin.

He withdrew the cork, searched for a knife, and set himself to chew the stopper smaller. This done he again fitted it to the mouth of the can, tipped it and secured it on the table. When tilted with an eye to effect a slow stream dribbled to the deck. Saunderson remarked it and drew back gibbering and pointing and begging for silence.

"They're all asleep," he whispered; "no one can wake 'em now. Lucy's lyin' down—cawn't keep her head up. Mary! you slut, sit down. Hush! d'ye mind what ye did wiv your babby? Laid on it. I say you did! No more squawkin'—I say you did. Stand back, you shiverin' fool!"

He drew away from the shadow again and watched the dripping oil. As the barge ambled under the influence of the flood, so the paraffin ran over the table edge on either side the stove. It stole across the cabin deck in growing rivulets. It trickled now this way, now that, until it had saturated not only the deck but the man, sitting there and counting his silent guests.

But Saunderson heeded nothing of this. He saw his puppets slowly stained and sodden and pushed the oil across to where he saw them sleeping.

"Shhh!" he mouthed. "Lilly, you'll never look me in the face again wiv them red eyes. You're goin' on a long journey my gell. You told me that before; but now you're back an' who's that you've got beside you? Snuffles! What's that you're tellin' him? Get your eyes off him. Yaas, I own up. I done it. You'll shake your finger at me, will you? Slut! I say you're goin' on a long journey again. Maybe you'll never come back—you nor, him—nor——"

He clambered to the stove and pushed a piece of paper through the bars. "I've got a way to finish you off!" he hissed, his voice leaping. "You an' him an' all the crew. Go down to hell an' burn. Go down an' burn. Gawd!"

Something sizzled in the fender. A light crept out. It danced like summer lightning, like the lightning he had seen out there—where—— Whirr! A blaze of fire encircled him. He rolled in it. He could not shake it off. He screamed and lurching up the ladder reached the deck. The blanket roared about him. Flames crackled in his hair. He leaped out to stifle them.

A sudden plunge; a hiss of steam; a voice in the darkness—and silence. The silence of the wide estuary beset with moving ships; the silence of the cold and pitiless moon shrouded in

fleecy cloudlets; the silence of the great unknown from whence no sound has ever come to warn us.

. . . . . .

A breeze stirred on the face of the waters and the *Red Gauntlet* moving before it drove now towards London, curiously lighted.

Meanwhile the *Stormy Petrel* flapped up river under Elliott's guidance seeking the boat wherein Susie moved homeward.

For an hour they had zigzagged there in the mist, skirting the Maplins, and the lights of Southend had grown bright; but the boat remained unfound. At the pier where for a while they paused, they learned that no one had landed since nine o'clock; certainly no girl had come ashore. It seemed possible therefore that they had passed the boat somewhere mist-hidden, and turned at once to sweep the seaward horizon. They went slowly now, with frequent pauses to listen, and out of the sheen came the cry of the gulls; the note of passing steamers, and the dulled bray of the lightships shouting their warnings.

Of wind there was scarcely a breath. A night of turgid placidity reigned, with a mist which would rapidly develop into fog with sunrise. The steaming breath of the marshes lay over them and somewhere out there where the mists seemed denser Susie sat in an open boat.

Elliott marched the bridge, alert, keen to retrieve; the crew with Micky Doolan at the wheel had eyes for nothing but their quest. Somewhere between Southend and the *Red Gauntlet* the girl would be found. Of that they made no question. A sailor given orders to reach a certain place and having to contend against certain natural forces would move in one way

only. Marley would skirt the sands. By doing this he would "cheat the tide" and save himself labour; that was abundantly certain. Only a fool moves against forces when he may harness them to his service, and Marley was no fool.

Elliott, Micky Doolan, and all those who were with them had no qualms on the subject. The only hindrance was the mist, and to give their passage a trifle more definition, they made music on their horn. That at all events was distinctive enough as those know who have writhed under the torture; but to these men horns speak a language. They can say off hand: "Ah—the Antwarp boat" or "The *Londoner* at it again" or "Hear the *Storm Cock* crowin', matee?"

And so with the *Stormy Petrel*. She carried an instrument of doleful intonation; a thing which gave out a dirge-like, sorrowing yell that no river man having once heard would ever mistake in the future.

They played upon it now in that haze and fleeting mist; lying sometimes idly to gather response, then again moving forward, searching the shadows—and so at length arrived once more in the Warp and came to a pause on the measured mile which lies off Shoeburyness. But Susie still lay somewhere in that haze with which they were shrouded.

Anxiety gripped them now. They questioned what it boded. Was this chap Marley all right? Could they trust him? And the answers came in vague contractions; some knew him and decided, twisting their words: "Marley! ho yuss; 'ee's all right"; but halted at further explanation: "Marley was—yass, there's no two ways abaat that—Marley's all right; but he's bin doin' a bit o' South Spainin' lately an'—" the vague intangibility droned on mouthing of the degeneracy of all those who come under foreign influence.

Again they moved. The night was perhaps less dark. The

mist hanging over the sands was whiter, more reflective of the moon standing there, high in the south. The song of the surf rolled to greet them, the dull drone of the engines sang in their ears, and out there rang a sound which had newly come into being.

Micky Doolan punched the gong—one stroke, emphasising it with "Sthop!" Then after a moment with pricked ears: "Whisht! did ye hear that?"

"I hear the surf," Elliott admitted. "Get her along."

"You're wrong," the skipper decided; "ut's a fog horn—a hand trumpet, my son, that's what ut was."

"Well, and what then?"

"Then—oh! as fer that, well, an' isnt' it loikely that Bill Marley has a trumpet wid him in the boat, annyways?"

Elliott moved over at this and the two faced the sands. "Out there ut wass," Micky explained.

"Then that's it agin?" Elliott suggested as a small note came down to them.

"Ut is."

"Go for it, my son, and give them our horn."

The *Stormy Petrel's* cry moaned over the waters. It reached the dim solitudes where the gulls and the sand pipers hold revel and again as they paused came the new note, a cry idiotic and supremely absurd, like the bleat of a sheep astray on the marshes. But it sufficed; because, to these men, when you are unable to see the loom of the bleater, you may assume that he lies very near the water and that a boat holds him.

Elliott sprang to the gong and punched it for full speed. "It's the boat," he cried. "The boat as sure as guns. Get her along!"

The skipper called down to the engine room, headed still farther over, then seized the whistle cord and blew a long, weird

call. And as they stood listening there came the notes of a song ringing curiously in the stillness:

"'If I had a maid as was so fair,
Ho! U-rio.
D'ye ye think I'd leave her to tear her hair.'"

It was the song of the old-time packets and Elliott recognised it at once. But Micky Doolan recognised something more; the song was not only the song of the packet rats, but it was the song of a chum. A snatch of a new chanty rolled in their ears and both men held their breath to listen.:

"'The times are hard and the wages low—
Leave her, Johnny, leave her;
The fo'c'sle's a hell where the slime does grow—
Oh! It's time for us to leave her.'"

"Hear that?" Micky Doolan questioned boisterously. "Hear ut? Mother av God! ut's Bill Marley."

But Elliott only paced to and fro the bridge. He spoke in a small voice. "Let her away, let her away!" he urged.

The moonlight streamed through the scud as they stood gazing up river, and a small black blotch showed amidst the flashing waters. Both saw it. They pointed simultaneously. The dancing, black blotch was a boat.

"Gad, man! give her wings."

"Wings ut is, sorr."

Elliott turned away. He descended to the main deck and came into the bows, asking himself whether Susie was there—whether after all he would win her—whether Saunderson had spoken straight when he said where the girl was, or whether this was only a further instance of the man's cunning—the thing which had baffled him all these months.

The tug crashed onward. He noticed that the water tossing under the forefoot was alive with tiny sparks, green, blue,

iridescent, fiery. A curious fact, too, that bowboard over which he leaned used to carry the name in white letters; now they were yellow and only part of it appeared. *Storm*—hah! symbolic. He asked again who was in that boat and strove to pierce the tantalising sheen; but his eyes were blurred, blurred as were his thoughts. He must wait.

In five minutes they had drawn so near that a man's figure came into view, standing erect, waving his arms. Why the devil did he play the fool and risk Susie's life? Cha! Was Susie there? Was anyone there beside that madman? The words of a song droned on his ears:

> "'One lime duck, an' a cockey two—
> Leave 'er, Johnny, leave 'er;
> Is all that is left of 'er bloomin' crew—
> O! 'twer time for us to leave 'er.'"

The accent of Seven Dials. "Odds take the fool, who wants to hear about——"

"The gell ain't there!" growled a fireman all sooty and reeking with sweat. "Onlie Bill's there. Hell!"

He turned and walked aft, disconsolate.

Elliott searched the boat: "Only Bill? Who was Bill? Two figures were there—two. His impatience grew. He lifted his voice to shout: "Who's there? In God's name, who's there?"

"Bill Marley an' the mide. Stidy steamboat—dahn't run us dahn!"

"Go easy Micky! Port! Port a bit." Elliott faced ahead. He saw and cried out joyfully: "Susie! My God it's Susie."

A voice came out of the shimmering waste, tremulously questioning: "Is that Jack? Is it?" Then in more definite tones: "Is that Jack Elliott?"

"Aye, lad! Stop her, Micky. Stop her."

The boat fell alongside and Marley grabbed at the rope which was thrown. "Lumme!" he growled, "if this don't beat a sun-dahner's breckfust, tell me. A stroke astarn, skip! So! Stop 'er. Naa then, Missy, give me yer 'and. This yer steambat's a disy fer jumpin'—an' 'er' commodation ladder ain't the pawler steps. Stidy! Naa then, jump's the word."

The girl sprang lightly up the side as the tug lurched down and in a moment she was in Jack's arms:

"God love you, lass! God love you!" he cried, holding her close.

"Oh! Jack, Jack—my husband——"

The group melted away. Some one swore vigorously in a thin falsetto. Micky Doolan sprang at him with an expressionless face. He pointed at the forecastle ladder and the figure disappeared. Then the skipper ascended the bridge ladder, examining the rungs with keen interest. "Be the skin av their teeth," he remarked, "an' the luck av the divil. Arroo! Mrs. Surridge. Arroo! Tony Crow ye long galoote. Ar——"

A breeze stirred the face of the waters and the *Stormy Petrel* moving with renewed freedom passed on toward London, braying on a horn that aped the note and diction of a cock crowing to greet the rising sun.

EPILOGUE

A GALE drove over the cold North Sea—the gale for which Saunderson had prayed.

For four days it raged with the hand of a master, lashing the sands with a switch that left the air alive with hisses. The sands laughed. They drew back their lips and showed teeth. The power they fought was afflicted by a monstrous indecision. Sometimes if flowed across them, sometimes yelped at their feet. It gathered force out there in the grayness and swept down upon them to blot them from their place; then died in a splutter of foam and mist and twisting eddies. The sands laughed aloud. The Gat was knee deep in feathers plucked from the breast of its enemy.

The lightships watched, bending like trees on a wind-swept plain. They called to each other with their flags: "All right, Black Deeps? All well, Edinburgh? Tongue, Mouse, Prince—what especially of the Tongue, lurching farthest amidst the spume?" And the answer came back through the buffettings, the groans, and the turmoil of the sea: "All well. We stand. All well. Seen the Tender?*

On the third day the watchers on the Red Kentish Knock† espied a body floating in the trough of the waves, and calling to each other the men told of the trouble that would fall on the homes ashore when the roll-call of the gale was read. But they knew not that none would weep for the dead they saw, for they knew not Saunderson, and it was he who drove about

*Trinity boat. †A lightship.

in the whirling spume and presently came to ground on the northern sands.

Here he lay who had wrought so much suffering. Unsought, unwept, unburied; his brawny limbs naked to the driving seas, he lay there—the man of destiny; a product of modern civilisation; brainy, full of subtle argument, crammed to the eyes with distorted fact—believing nothing; believing all things.

The Gat received him. It bared its teeth to give him welcome. The shells rilled up and formed terraces about him. He stared wide-eyed into the sheen.

UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY
A 000 029 973 5